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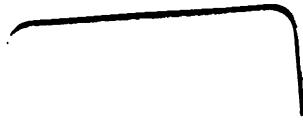
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THREE TO ONE

VOL. I.

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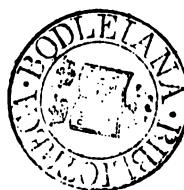
SOME PASSAGES OUT OF THE LIFE OF
AMICIA LADY SWEETAPPLE

BY GEORGE WEBBE DASENT, D.C.L.

AUTHOR OF "ANNALS OF AN EVENTFUL LIFE"

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.



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THREE TO ONE.



CHAPTER I.

SETTLING THE PARTY AT HIGH BEECH.

Fyou will be guided by me, my dear, you will ask them all." These words were spoken by Sir Thomas Carlton to his wife at High Beech at the end of May, 1870. If any one wishes to know where High Beech is, all that can be answered is, that it is a charming old house, about twenty miles from London; and further, if any one supposes that it is this or that actual High Beech of his acquaintance, the answer again is, that High Beech is not the real name of the house where Sir John and his wife live; and so curious readers must be content to take this story as it is told, and the names of persons and places as they are given, without seeking to pry into private history, and

racking their brains to identify them, as though they were real existences, and not mere creations and inventions of the writer. People often complain of the want of invention and creative power in authors, and it is very true that poverty of plot and bankruptcy of ideas are often the bane of novelists ; but what is that when weighed against want of imagination and lack of faith, in a reader who fancies, if such people ever "fancy," that a writer must have seen everything with his own eyes, and even touched it, in true British fashion, with his fingers, and so saddles him with eavesdropping and tale-bearing when he is in fact only spinning his story, like a spider, out of his own brain, and weaving a web which a matter-of-fact public regards as made up of personalities merely because it is so natural and lifelike ?

After this tirade against a very worthy class of persons, let us return to High Beech and its owners. Sir Thomas, who is just advising his wife to ask them "all," is a middle-aged man. If any one asks what middle-aged means, we answer boldly "fifty;" and if any one grumbles, and says, "I call that more than middle-aged," we say we cannot help it, that is our notion of middle-age. But if Sir Thomas was fifty, how old

was Lady Carlton ? That, it must be owned, is a more difficult question to answer ; but when we remember that Lady Carlton was married out of the nursery when not quite eighteen, and that her two daughters are, the elder nineteen and the younger eighteen, we may safely put her down as under forty, though what margin remains to her below that age we would rather leave it to ladies to settle than determine ourselves. "Then they were both middle-aged," some one exclaims ; "regular old fogies." Here let us reason with this exclainer, and first inquire, How is it possible for the world to exist, and what is much more to the present purpose, for novels to be written, if there are no middle-aged people in the world ? All things have an end and purpose here on earth, and so have men of fifty and women of forty ; especially if the men are well-to-do, with nice houses, and the women still charming, as women just below forty are very apt to be. Again, if there were no middle-aged people how should we have any young blood, on which, of course, all the force and passion of our story runs riot ? Ah ! if the middle-aged would only remember that they were once as young and giddy as the wildest of these unbacked colts and fillies, and if the young would but reflect that the day will

surely come, unless they are prematurely cut off, when they, too, will be old fogies—if that were so, the young and the middle-aged would be more charitable, and the wheels of life would revolve a deal more smoothly than is too often the case.

But let us get on. As it is, the reader has only been introduced to Sir Thomas and Lady Carlton, and further informed of the fact that they are middle-aged and have two daughters. Sir Thomas Carlton is a baronet and a merchant in the City. A long time ago one of his ancestors—for it must not be forgotten that even merchants in the City may have ancestors—lent the Government of George I. a large sum of money; we believe it was when the Stuarts were giving the House of Hanover great trouble, and in return the Prime Minister of that day made him a baronet. Nowadays, of course, he would have been made a peer, but we were more frugal of our honours a hundred and fifty years ago, and so Mr. Thomas Carlton of Lombard Street was only made Sir Thomas Carlton. “A baronet in 1715 and not a peer in 1870,” some of you will say, “and the firm prospering all that time. That is what one can never understand.” And then you run over on your fingers all the noble houses which, since 1715, have sprung up on the mushroom-bed

of Lombard Street, and name the Smiths and Joneses, and Lloyds and Browns, who are now peers ; and not merely Irish peers, but peers of the realm and the United Kingdom, and again you say, “ How was it that the Carltons escaped a peerage ? ” We quite admit this question is hard to answer. Indeed, when we think of it, we often wonder why we are not all peers. Our wonder is perhaps tempered by the reflection that in a nation of peers a commoner would be the most distinguished person in the realm ; but in this particular case of the Carltons, we believe the reason is to be found in the fact that they were always in opposition after that fatal baronetcy was bestowed. So that when the Whigs were in office the Sir Thomas Carlton of that day was a Tory, and when the Tories came in, the head of the firm was a Whig. Besides which, from time immemorial it had been the maxim of the house to mind their business and not go into Parliament, and thus they had continued merchant-princes, growing richer and richer as the wealth of England waxed, investing in good securities, laying out their savings in land, respected on 'Change, not ruining themselves by having too many children, now and then buying good pictures and objects of art, but never wasting their money on second-rate things because they were “ so cheap.”

In a word, living honestly, honourably, and happily, and dying at peace and in charity with all men. This particular Sir Thomas of whom we are talking was a tall, handsome man, with a bald massive head, a bright eye, and a very good set of teeth. His expression was peculiarly cheerful and pleasant, and yet he had a firm look, as though his word was as good as his deed, and the man better than both. As to intellect and mind, he made no parade of learning, and generally said little in conversation, but it was often remarked that when Sir Thomas Carlton said anything it was sure to be worth listening to. His only fault was that he was sometimes a little “fussy” about his wife and children.

Lady Carlton was, as we have already intimated, a very charming woman. She was a distant cousin of her husband's; and having married early a man ten years or more older than herself, her character had been formed in great measure by him. On some points, as is the case with all women, she had a will of her own; but as a rule her will was to do what her husband wished, and as he, for his part, was far too sensible ever to interfere in those matters in which she had a will, the result was that no houses were more harmonious, so far as husband and wife were concerned, than No. — Grosvenor Square and

High Beech, where we now find this happy and most united pair. Here we are reminded that this is a painfully photographic age, and that no moral description is complete unless accompanied by a personal portrait. Well, then, what was Lady Carlton like? We have already said she was close upon forty, but in reality she looked much younger. There are some forms and faces, indeed, which have gone through soul persecutions as trying as those of the early Christians; women who have been thrown into the fiery furnace of adversity, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and yet come out unscathed and unscared. These rare characters have such moral force and dignity that their will occupies those earthworks of the body—the face, the figure, and the form—and hold them safe against all persecutions and attacks. “How lovely, and yet how tormented!” we exclaim, when gazing on one of these social martyrs. But Lady Carlton was no social martyr; she had retained the freshness of her youth for a very good reason: simply because she had never been tormented. She had done her duty to every one, and every one had done their duty to her. Her worst trials had been taking her daughters to the dentist; and though she had a most feeling heart, her only sorrows were sympathies

for others. She had no sufferings of her own. How few there are that can say this, and how bound are those who are able to say it, to be always good, and charming, and gracious; all which in truth Lady Carlton was. For the rest, she was tall, her hair was a dark brown, her eyes were grey, she was well made, and had preserved a beautiful figure. In earlier times public opinion would have called Sir Thomas and Lady Carlton a “most proper pair”—words which, we need not say, have nothing to do with good behaviour, but refer exclusively to the look and bearing of those to whom they are applied.

But who were the “all” to whom Sir Thomas referred in the opening words of this chapter? It is clear of course that there was to be a party at High Beech, to which the Carltons had run down for a few days from London smoke; and after some discussion, in which several names had been mentioned, Sir Thomas had advised his wife to ask them all.

“But will they go well together?” asked Lady Carlton, with some hesitation.

“Oh yes, they are sure to agree; and if they don’t, it will be only for a day or two. Besides, a certain amount of antipathy in guests often makes a country-house pleasanter if no actual quarrel arises.”

“I am not so sure of that, at least so far as the mistress of the house is concerned. Men can go out and ease their minds by a long walk, even on a wet day; but suppose it turns to rain, and Lady Sweetapple is shut up in one of her tempers, what am I to do with her?”

“As for that,” said Sir Thomas, “you know we must have Lady Sweetapple. She is as good as asked, not to mention the fact that she half asked herself. Let us hope then that it will not rain, that she will not have one of her tempers, that she will be as charming as every one says she is—in a word, that she will have a pleasant visit and make our house pleasant.”

“I see that Lady Sweetapple must come. There is no help for it; but how she will get on with Mr. Beeswing, if he begins to tease her, I am sure I can’t tell.”

“Beeswing tease her! Why, they are the best friends in the world. He was devoted to her at the Foreign Office crush last week, and, I hear, caught the rheumatism in cloaking her and taking her to her carriage.”

“Well, then, let us put down both the sexes on a card. Thus: Women, Sweetapple—Men, Beeswing. Who come next?”

"Shall we ask any diplomats—Beeswing knows them all?" asked Sir Thomas.

"Well, there were no diplomats in that 'all' which you advised me to ask; but I don't mind Count Pantouffles. He is so handsome, and so stupid, and so gentlemanlike. He will be an ornament to the table, and if that young lady, described by Dickens, who fell in love with a barber's block, is now alive and in society, and if we know her—a great many 'ifs' I admit—she will be quite happy to sit next to Count Pantouffles and listen to his unwearying attentions."

"Put down Pantouffles by all means," said Sir Thomas. "I quite forgot him, the more so that Lady Sweetapple told me he was so clever."

"And now to come back to the 'all.' It was made up of Lady Sweetapple and Mr. Beeswing, and Edward Vernon and Harry Fortescue, and Mr. and Mrs. Marjoram, and Colonel and Mrs. Barker. That was your 'all,' and now we have got Count Pantouffles. How many does that make?"

"Nine in all; so that, with ourselves and the two girls, we shall be thirteen in the house. Add a few neighbours, and we shall soon have twenty to dinner; quite enough in all conscience."

“Yes, my dear, that will make a very nice party, if Mr. and Mrs. Marjoram don’t quarrel.”

“Well, quarrel or not, the Marjorams must come. They have asked us ever so many times to Box Hill, and we have never gone. It is a bore to meet Marjoram in the City and hear him repeat ‘Why do you not come to Box Hill?’ I shall be able to turn the tables on him by asking him to High Beech. But it is eleven o’clock; I must be off to catch the train. Pray send out the invitations. And let me see, this is the 22nd of May. Ask them all for the 1st of June, and then they can’t any of them say they have had no notice.”

With these words Sir Thomas Carlton left his wife, and drove away in his T-cart to the station, promising to return in good time for dinner.

When he was gone, Lady Carlton began to write and to soliloquise. First, she wrote to Lady Sweetapple.

“‘My dear Lady Sweetapple.’ Is it quite sure that she is my dear Lady Sweetapple? Am I bound to call a woman ‘dear’ whom I don’t care about one bit, and who cares no more for me than if I were this pen? Well, well! it’s the way of the world. We are all dear, some of us too dear, to one another.” So she went on writing and thinking

aloud, and Lady Sweetapple's note was duly written and addressed to "Lady Sweetapple, No. —, Lowndes Street, Belgrave Square." Here let us remark that if you know any one in Lowndes Street, take care you don't forget to put "Belgrave Square" after the name of the street. We have known serious quarrels arise out of this neglect.

"Lowndes Street, Belgrave Square," said Lady Carlton. "That will do very nicely. There's no use wondering whether she will come. She has as good as accepted already."

"The Hon. Edward Beeswing, Grosvenor Mansions. He I hope will come; he is always witty and amusing."

So the Hon. Edward Beeswing's note was written and addressed. "Poor fellow!" thought Lady Carlton. "He has had a hard time of it: often in love, and never able to marry, and now getting old. I do pity younger sons; and yet his elder brother, Lord Port, with his earldom and estates, is not to be compared to Edward Beeswing. But this, too, is the way of the world—wit here and wealth there."

Next came Mr. and Mrs. Marjoram. "Sweet Marjoram" he used to be called till he married Mrs. Marjoram, but then all his sweetness vanished. He

was a distant relation of Lord Pennyroyal; but for one or two generations the Marjoram family had been in trade as Russian merchants, and no man was more respected in Mincing Lane, or wherever it is in the City that tallow and bristles most abound.

“What a pity it is,” Lady Carlton went on thinking, “that one must always ask husband and wife together! Mrs. Marjoram is pleasant enough by herself; and as for Mr. Marjoram, he is charming; but both at once in a house are beyond bearing, for they either quarrel like cat and dog, or one sits on the brink of a crater in fear and trembling that an eruption will speedily break out. But Sir Thomas wishes it, and what must be, must be!”

So Mr. and Mrs. Marjoram’s note was written and addressed to “Mrs. Marjoram, Great Cumberland Street, Hyde Park.”

“Now come Colonel and Mrs. Barker. Both very nice people, if the wife were not so fond of bright colours and the husband would not tell such long stories. However, they are a very loving pair, and they will do well enough to fill up; and now let me see whom have we left—Edward Vernon and Harry Fortescue. If they can’t come, Florence and Alice will call it dull; but I am sure the two friends will come if they possibly can. They are inseparable,

and both everything that one would wish to see in young men, except that they are rather idle."

So Edward Vernon and Harry Fortescue had their notes written, and when that labour was over Lady Carlton was surprised to find that it was almost time for luncheon. She had forgotten how fast time flies when you spend one half the morning in planning a party with your husband, and the other in writing the invitations necessary to give that plan effect.





CHAPTER II.

WHAT HIGH BEECH WAS LIKE.

NOW let us leave Lady Carlton and her daughters to get their luncheon in peace; let us not follow Sir Thomas to Lombard Street, but let us linger at High Beech all alone, and say what sort of house it was. There was a tradition in the country that High Beech had been built by Inigo Jones, but whether there was any truth in the belief no one could say. The nearest approach to certainty in the matter was, that the house belonged to the age of Inigo Jones, and that it was, like so many mansions, ascribed to him on very slender authority. But whoever built it, High Beech was a noble house. Externally it formed three sides of a square, consisting of a high centre and two lower wings, one of which contained the stables and the other the offices. The middle was in the Renaissance style of red brick decorated with pilasters, and with dormer windows in the top

story. Besides being tall, it was broad and deep; and as, when you see a tall, deep-chested, broad-backed man, you say "I am sure that fellow has good lungs," so, when you looked at High Beech, you said "What a spacious house! I am sure every one is well housed and lodged within its walls." Nor would your judgment have been mistaken. Inside High Beech was comfort itself, and you felt that no damp could ever penetrate such solid walls. The entrance was by a flight of steps leading up to a portico, and though some said the portico was an eyesore, there could be no doubt that it was a great protection to the outer hall from the east wind. From this outer hall one passed into an inner one, and once inside it one felt that the east wind might blow till his cheeks cracked, for not one puff could ever make its way so far. That inner hall was very spacious, panelled with black oak, and hung with portraits of the Carlton family and their friends. High Beech had come into the possession of the Carltons about the time of that loan to the Government of George I.'s time. Before that it had belonged to a family named Shaw, who lent money in their day to Charles II., and when they died out the Carltons bought it. In the centre of the hall was a magnificent oak staircase, as black

with age, and as slippery with rubbing, as any staircase could be. It would have been well if any record existed to tell how many of the Shaws in old time and of the Carltons in the last century had got their deaths by falling down those polished stairs. But, alas ! no such documents existed. All that was known positively on the subject was that elderly and even middle-aged gentlemen, who stayed at High Beech, were often observed skulking up to bed by the back staircases, rather than face that perilous ascent after a good dinner. As it was, there were frequent tumbles, the suddenness of which was only equalled by their severity ; but, for all that, those black oak stairs were a sort of palladium with the housemaids at High Beech, who went on scrubbing them and polishing them every morning, singing and carolling all the time, as though they were not laying traps for the unwary, that he might fall in the twinkling of an eye, and find himself toppled down-stairs head foremost.

But we have forgotten that it is not yet time to scale that "staircase perilous." We must turn to the right as we stand in the hall facing the staircase, and enter first into the breakfast-room, which looked out on the side of the flight of steps by which the house was approached. There was nothing about

this room to distinguish it from other breakfast-rooms, except that it was the worst fitted room for breakfast in the house. Out of the breakfast-room one passed to the library—a noble room, square and lofty, containing about ten thousand volumes. Some of our readers may think ten thousand books a very small number, but we think if any man has ten thousand volumes under his roof, he will not only find them quite enough to supply his love of reading with material for study during a lifetime, but also quite enough to fill a very large room and to give his servants great trouble in dusting them. Let it not, however, be supposed that the Carltons were a family who grudged the space their books occupied. There are houses, indeed, and great ones, in which the only books in spacious libraries are the "Racing Calendar," the "Whole Duty of Man," and a few old monthly magazines; but the library at High Beech was quite different. It was not only an extensive, but a well-chosen collection. Before all other branches of knowledge it was rich in the classics, in county histories, and in French and Italian books. Nor was England neglected, and every department of literature in the mother-tongue was well represented. In a word, the library at High Beech was a room in which, on a wet day, or even on a fine day, a man

not wholly given over to the demon of sport might draw a chair to the fire in the winter, or ensconce himself behind a screen in the summer, and so for hours enjoy that sweet converse with the spirits of the departed which is the only true *clairvoyance*, and which is so consolatory even to a disputatious reader, inasmuch as while he hears what the writer has to say on any subject, he is sure not to be contradicted to his face, as is the way of men who defend their opinions by word of mouth. Certainly, if silence be silver, reading is golden, and in no house in England could such gold be more amply gathered than in the library at High Beech. As for its decorations, they were books. "Why, it is all books!" said a child who was taken to see the room. "Have you read them all, Lady Carlton?" As the jewels of Cornelia were her children, so books were the ornament of that library. High up on the top of the cases, out of the reach of criticism, were a few ambiguous ancestors, a bust or two of classical worthies, and six or seven Etruscan vases; but beyond these, as the child said, the library was "all books."

Now we have got as far as the angle of the house at that corner, and turn into two splendid drawing-rooms, which filled the whole front of the house facing the park. From a sort of alcove in the

centre of that front a flight of steps led down to a terrace, and then another flight to another terrace, and so on to a third, beyond which was a "haha." Between each terrace, down to the "haha," was an Italian garden and smooth lawns, on which rare shrubs and conifers flourished; and beyond all was the park, with its fine old free-standing trees and its herd of deer, which in that year 1870 of which we write were eagerly cropping the grass which was soon to render their haunches such objects of interest to aldermen in particular and all gluttons in general.

But we must not walk out of the house, even though June with all its leaves and warmth is hard upon us. We must go back, and like trusty showmen take our readers the round of the house. Where were we? In the middle of the drawing-rooms. As we are not upholsterers, suffice it to say that they were filled with costly furniture, and "replete," as the advertisements say, "with every luxury befitting a family of distinction." We shall soon have to return to them, so let us hasten on with our bird's-eye view, and enter at the angle opposite to the library into the boudoir of Lady Carlton, not a very large room, but evidently the abode of ease and taste. Farther than that on this

first morning we cannot go. Beyond it was the dining-room, which nearly filled up the space which answered to the breakfast-room and library on the opposite side of the hall, and was approached by a door from the drawing-rooms, which opened into the hall under the noble staircase, of which and its slipperiness we have already spoken.

And now, as the reader may be supposed to know something of the ground-floor at High Beech, we may take him up-stairs. That slippery staircase, after it had climbed half-way up the height of the ground-floor, divided into two flights, right and left. By them we ascend to a gallery, from which we have a fine view of the hall; and thence we proceed on either hand down spacious passages, lighted at each end by wide and lofty windows. At the end of each of these passages we find flights of stairs to an upper story of rooms, and above these again we find another story of attics, lighted by the dormer windows, which form a feature of the house from the outside.

But now that we have left the ground-floor and got up into the region of housemaids and bed-rooms, we are not about to be so bold at present as to lead our readers into any of these bed-rooms. If you peep into bed-rooms in a strange house who can tell

what may befall you? We shall have to speak a little of these bed-rooms farther on, but at this period of our story, when we have as yet scarcely set foot over the threshold of High Beech, and hardly know one of its inmates, how can we push into their bed-rooms either with or without knocking. Every right-minded reader must see that such a proceeding would be manifestly most improper, and so readers that are more curious than right-minded must restrain their desires, and wait till we can ask them to enter a bed-room without the fear of finding one's self thrust out by a lady's-maid, and the door slammed in our faces.

“Why then did you take us up that slippery staircase if we are to see nothing, and then walk down delicately, like Agag, as though we were treading on eggs?” For several reasons, reader. First, because the staircase was slippery, and we wished to see if you could walk down with the jauntiness of that king of Amalek. Secondly, because we wished to see whether you were a snob, who is fond of peeping and prying into things which do not concern you. Thirdly, because there was nothing to see up there, as the rooms were all empty. And fourthly, because we wished to take you somewhere else. We would say “elsewhither.”

only having said once in a letter to a lady that we were going “elsewhither,” she asked another friend whose house “elsewhither” was, as we had written to say that we were going to it on a visit. After this lesson, we advise all readers and all writers to be cautious in writing good and grammatical English, lest it should happen to them as it happened to us, to think we were using an adverb of place, and to find it had been mistaken to mean a place itself.

“Elsewhere, then: where is that, if we are not to see the bed-rooms?” Well, there are two elsewherees, as you may all find some day to your cost. You may either go to the offices and the kitchen if you think that gluttony is the best policy, though for ourselves we have a wholesome fear of the cook’s dish-clout, and much prefer to judge of kitchens as of men, by their works. We advise you therefore to leave the kitchen to itself and come with us to the stables in the opposite wing and see the horses. “You don’t like horses?” Why, what a man you must be! “Oh, but you are not a man—all readers are not men—some of them are women, and you are a woman.” Here, again, we observe that you must be a very bad woman if you do not like horses, and looking at them. You had better come with us and see the stables, or we shall set you down at once as

one of those wicked women who work horses to death, who pay cabmen sixpence a mile, and when they job horses, drive them about all day, and make them stand out for hours in the cold at night, and then wonder how it is that their unhappy coachman looks so wan and pinched next morning, and how the horses lose their flesh, and their coats stare as though they had been ridden by a nightmare. Do you still say that you will not go to the stables? Then, as you can't be forced, stay away; but had you gone you would have seen a most original old coachman and many fine horses, including two belonging to Alice and Florence Carlton, who were very fond of them as well as of riding.





CHAPTER III.

THE YOUNG LADIES AT LUNCHEON.

AS we turn from the stables and look at the back of the house, where the entrance really is, we see the two daughters of the house tripping up the stone steps, warned by the luncheon gong to make haste home. High Beech was in all respects a punctual, regular house. Breakfast, luncheon, and dinner were served to the minute, and if the commercial career of the house of Carlton conveyed any moral, it was that of the absolute value of time. In this respect, you see this Carlton House was the very reverse of another Carlton House, of which we have all read or heard, and which stood where Carlton Terrace, and Carlton Gardens, and the Athenæum, and the Travellers' and the Reform clubs now stand ; and so, while the house of the Carltons at High Beech flourished and prospered like a bay tree, the other has been long

since pulled down, its site built over, and its very name half forgotten.

But there are the two young ladies tripping up the steps while our story halts to moralise. There they were, and you could even tell from their backs that they were young and happy. Let them run off, merry young things, in the warm sunshine ; we can never catch them now and see their faces. We must wait till they come down to luncheon.

They were not long in making their appearance, and found their mother waiting for them. And now a most uncharitable thing must be said. In no other point of view was High Beech more fortunate than in this : in it the age of governesses was past. Their dreary reign was over. There are of course exceptions to every rule, and some families have been very happy with their governesses ; but in general they are little better than policemen in women's clothes, or rather female detectives with whom you have to be on intimate terms. But this is very wicked and shocking, you say ? So it is ; but is it not the very truth ? Look at it in another way. Was any man ever known to be on familiar terms with a policeman ? Cooks, indeed, appeal to them when butlers and footmen are unsympathetic ; but we doubt whether policemen have any real

friends out of the force. In fact, you can't be good friends with a man who is able to take you up at any moment. In this respect policemen are like the National Guards in Paris in 1871. They have no friends. You might as well pull the Chief Justice of England by the beard as take any liberty with a policeman; and yet what is the governess in the family but a worse policeman? There the wretched being is, between the servants on the one side and the family on the other. Sometimes the servants won't wait on her, and once there was a governess who was found starved to death because none of the domestics, male or female, would "demean" themselves, as they termed it, by taking up her meals to the school-room. On the other hand, if she is treated as one of the family, as the lady who is to bring up your children like ladies ought to be, she is a perpetual bore, and everything like confidential conversation between husband and wife becomes impossible. How many secrets would Brown have told his wife, if Miss Parker had not come in just at that very moment? And how much gossip would not Mrs. Brown have repeated to her husband at or after dinner, unless the same lady had been seated at the side of the table, staring them in the face? Talk of a skeleton in a cupboard in every

family! a governess is a skeleton out of it. Three are proverbially no company; but what shall we call a company of three—two of whom are husband and wife, and the third a governess? The result generally is that a governess is not treated as one of the family, and then in what a painful position is the family placed; knowing that a very estimable person, to whom they are mainly indebted for their education, so far as the daughters are concerned, is condemned by their own selfishness and love of ease to perpetual solitary confinement?

Happy therefore, and thrice happy, were the Carlton family, inasmuch as the daughters were beyond the age of governesses, and that Sir Thomas and Lady Carlton were no longer compelled to keep a resident policeman in petticoats.

“Well, girls,” said Lady Carlton, “it is all settled. I have persuaded your father to have a few friends down here on the 1st of June, and I have asked——”

“Who, who, mamma?” exclaimed both the young ladies at once.

“Don’t be so impatient. No one is coming that you care for very much. No young ladies I mean.”

“Yes,” said Florence, the elder, and livelier, and

bolder of the two ; “ but then there are other persons than young ladies in the world.”

“ Very true,” answered her mother. “ There are old men and women, and men and women of middle age, and women who are neither very old nor very young ; and so we have begun by asking Lady Sweetapple.”

“ Dear Lady Sweetapple !” said Alice. “ I am so fond of her !”

“ More than I am,” burst out Florence. “ I don’t like her. She is what I call a flirt ; and besides, she takes away my partners, and that I call unfair in a widow.”

“ O Florry !” said Alice, “ how can you say such horrid things ? Why shouldn’t young widows dance if they like it ? I am sure you never lost a partner on account of Lady Sweetapple.”

“ I’m not so sure of that,” said her sister ; “ but even if I don’t, I say again it isn’t fair in a widow who has had what I call her chance, to return to unmarried life, as it were, and, if you must have it, to poach on the preserves of young ladies.”

“ I suppose, then,” said Lady Carlton, “ you would banish poor Lady Sweetapple to the region of real preserves, and condemn her to endless jam and jelly making, as ladies who had had their chance, as you

call it, in ancient days used to spend their widowed lives. But I rather agree with Alice, and do not at all see why young widows like Lady Sweetapple should not dance, provided they dance well and are attractive enough to get partners."

"Well, mamma," said the forward Florry, "it is no use arguing the matter when you and Alice are agreed. The fact is, you both are much fonder of Lady Sweetapple than I am, or shall ever be. When Alice knows more of the world, and has seen her nicest partners carried off after supper by that odious Lady Sweetapple, she won't like her any better than I."

"Well, let us drop Lady Sweetapple," said Lady Carlton, "and eat our luncheon in peace and charity with all men and women."

"I wish that were always so easy, mamma," said Florry. "Dear me, what vexations there are in life!"

"Dreadful, my dear," said her mother with a laugh. "Two seasons, or rather one and a half, have turned you into a moralist, as well as the asserter of young ladies' rights against widows and married women."

"Don't tease poor Florry, mamma," said Alice; "but do tell us who is coming besides Lady Sweetapple."

“Here is the list,” said Lady Carlton. “Mr. and Mrs. Marjoram, Mr. Beeswing, Colonel and Mrs. Barker, Edward Vernon and Harry Fortescue, and, I forgot, Count Pantouffles.”

“Well, I must say,” said Florry, “the company improves as it goes on. As for Mr. and Mrs. Marjoram, I shall get on very well with them. They never quarrel except with themselves, and if you can contrive to keep them apart and out of one another’s sight the whole time they are here, no doubt they will be very happy, and go away declaring they have had a charming visit. Mrs. Barker is a good creature. I only wish she had studied the harmony of colours a little more. Nor is the colonel bad company till he begins to tell one of his Indian stories. Mr. Beeswing is always delightful. I, for one, am glad he is coming, if for no other reason than that I am sure he hates Lady Sweetapple. I do so hope he will make some fun out of her. As for the two others, we all know that Alice likes Edward Vernon, and as for me, why I suppose I must put up with Harry.”

“O Florry!” said Alice through a very dawn of blushes; “how can you go on saying that I like Edward Vernon, when I have scarcely seen him half a dozen times in my life?”

“Never mind, darling, what I say,” said Florry. “Then you don’t like Edward, and Lady Sweetapple, that she-wolf in widow’s weeds, has your perfect leave to carry him off if she can. As for only seeing Edward Vernon half a dozen times, that’s a story I never expected to hear from a little woman usually so truthful. You have seen him a dozen times at least. And again, I should like to know what has become of that creature of our earliest imaginations—Love at first sight? What has become of Cupid in that shape? Does he never come down like a god and take a strong and stubborn heart by storm in the twinkling of an eye? Ah! I see—he fled from earth when we all became so selfish and matter-of-fact.”

“Who is teasing now?” said Lady Carlton, infinitely amused at the impetuous Florry’s attack on the bashful Alice. “But what do you mean by putting up with Harry? I always thought Harry Fortescue was the most charming young man of the present time.”

“So he is,” said Florry; “and I can safely say so because we are good friends and nothing more. To my mind, the great charm of Harry Fortescue is, that he never makes love. All he seems to care about is to enjoy himself as much as he can, and to

throw himself with heart and soul into the amusement of the hour. I never saw any one so earnest in his pleasure ; it is pleasure for pleasure's sake, and not pleasure for the sake of love-making."

" Yes, Florry," cried Alice, " and that's just what dear Miss Stokes used to say was so awful in a young person's life—' the reckless pursuit of pleasure.' Don't you remember how she used to warn us against amusement and pleasure except as a means to a great end ? "

" All stuff and nonsense, Alice : and let me tell you, if you go on bringing Miss Stokes to witness against me, I won't sleep in the same room with you. No ! you sha'n't ever see me do my back-hair. I won't walk with you nor sit next you at church. No ! Thank heaven, the rule of Miss Stokes in this house came to an end when she gave you her last lesson and papa settled a pension on her."

" Come, Florence," said Lady Carlton, " I can't let you abuse poor Miss Stokes, to whom both you and Alice owe so much. No doubt you are both right : she certainly, when she warned you both against the reckless pursuit of pleasure ; and you, in your turn, when you say that you like to see young men like Harry Fortescue enter heartily into the amusements of life. Both views are perfectly compatible with

Christian duty, and I, for one, am sure that I trust the day will never come when Englishmen and Englishwomen will either pursue pleasure as though it were the sole end and aim of existence, or look so morosely on cheerful and harmless amusements as to turn society into a Methodist meeting-house."

"Well, mamma," said Miss Florence, "I am sure both Alice and I are much obliged to you for your able explanation and reconciliation of duty and amusement; but what I want to know is, why we can't amuse ourselves without thinking of anything else. It is so provoking, just when you are looking forward to a waltz, to find your partner trying to coax you into a conservatory, or lingering in the recess of a window, only to babble out a few disjointed words which mean nothing but that he hopes and trusts that at some future time, if all goes well, he may look forward to—what? why, only to meeting one again! As if one would ever care to meet a man again who wastes the precious moments, which ought to be spent in whirling round the room, in such unmeaning nothings! That's why I like Harry Fortescue; he never wastes time in philandering. If he has anything to say he says it outright. And as for dancing, I do declare, after a season and a half's experience, there never was such a dancer."

“No one can say that you are not an enthusiastic advocate for dancing,” said Lady Carlton, as she gave her eldest daughter a kiss, happy in the pleasure and loveliness of her children, and perhaps not without a feeling of relief that neither of them as yet had shown any decided preference for any one of the many young men whom they met in society.





CHAPTER IV.

THE INVITATIONS ARE ACCEPTED.

NOW we must leave High Beech for a while, and turn to London ; and first we will go to No. —, Lowndes Street, and call on Lady Sweetapple. We are early, and find her just come down to breakfast ; but we make no apology, for novelists are like physicians—they call at all hours on their characters ; and though the doctor sometimes finds his patients “not at home,” we never yet knew a character who denied himself to his novelist.

And now, before Lady Sweetapple is aware of our presence, we will take a good look at her, and see what she is like. How old was she ? To this question we answer boldly, Lady Sweetapple was under thirty. Of course, you might be taken to the *Peerage and Baronetage*, and there you would soon find the reputed, or reported, age of Amicia Lady Sweetapple, the young widow of Sir John Sweetapple, of

Quarendon Hall, in North Devon. But as novelists ought to know best about the ages of their creations, being, in fact, an authority far above Dod, or Debrett, or Burke, we scorn to take a mean advantage of a lady, and say merely that Lady Sweetapple was under thirty. She might, to look at her, have been twenty-five or twenty-seven, but she certainly was not above thirty. She was not very tall, and her figure was rather slight, though she was very well-shaped, and so perhaps looked rather slighter than she really was. Her complexion was, if you understand what we mean by the term, a fair brunette. Her eyes were a soft Irish gray, and there was, in fact, a dash of Milesian blood in her composition. She had a very pretty mouth, firm, and at the same time full; her nose was straight and fine, with very beautiful, delicate nostrils. She had small ears and hands and feet, and altogether was a very attractive woman. We see at once, therefore, that Florence Carlton was right when she said she was the sort of woman to take away nice partners from young ladies; and in society she had two great advantages, if women so situated know how to make use of them. She was a widow, and unfettered—her own *chaperone*, in fact; and she was nearly thirty, that very turning-point of a woman's life, before

which some people have asserted that a woman is not a woman. Here is the French saying: "*Femme n'est pas femme que quand elle a trente ans.*" Who it was that said it we cannot say, but whoever said it was a shrewd observer of women's nature; and certainly in Lady Sweetapple's case he would have been quite right. It was impossible to look at Lady Sweetapple and not to feel, whatever difference of opinion there might be about her looks, that you had before you a woman of rare natural gifts, and with the power to make sad havoc on the human heart. "I don't think her the least good-looking," man after man said; and yet almost every man who approached felt drawn to her, and had to make her acquaintance, whether he would or no. In this respect she was as arrant a siren as though she had lived all her days on those "diamond rocks" in the Straits of Messina; and we very much doubt whether Ulysses or Jason, or any of those ancient worthies, could have resisted the advances of Lady Sweetapple if she had been seen "sleeking her soft, alluring locks" with her golden combs, and singing a low, soft song of love. And now, when we have added that she was notoriously more a man's than a woman's beauty, we have said almost all that we have to say about her just now. The real fact was

that most women were too afraid of her to admire her; for if it be true that "perfect love casteth out fear," the converse is no less sure, that perfect fear casteth out love.

Here let it be remarked that landowners in North Devon have one great advantage. They are so out of the way that few people care what they do. So it comes about that a Devonshire scandal is not half such an exposure as one in the home counties; and while no one could dare to run away from his wife and children for a season in Hertfordshire or Surrey or Essex, the same crime might be committed in the valleys of the Taw and the Torridge, or beyond Bude in Cornwall, and so on quite down to the Land's End itself, and no one out of the West of England would be one whit the wiser.

Somehow or other there was a veil over the early history of Lady Sweetapple, and yet no one could say a word against her. She had been born, it was said, or at any rate educated, abroad, and that when very young, perhaps after she had been put to school with those very sirens in the Straits of Messina, she had met and married Sir John Sweetapple, then on a roving tour in his yacht. They had only been married a year or two, having lived for the most part still abroad, when Sir John died, and was

buried with his forefathers in Quarendon Abbey, which you may find in a nook somewhere along the North Devon coast, if you strain your eyes hard enough and long enough.

The siren had no children. Perhaps the race was destined to die out with her, the last of the old stock. Perhaps not, for the breed is brisk, and the strain strong and stout. Perhaps there will never be a time when there are no sirens. Those who have suffered by them will say, “Would to heaven the whole race of sirens were extinct!” Those who have not will exclaim, “What folly! They are a very harmless race. Why should they die out any more than Lord Tankerville’s white cattle and the great auk? Let them live, poor things, were it only for our instruction and amusement.”

When Sir John died he left no direct heir to inherit the title; that went to a distant cousin. But he made his will, as the husbands of sirens often do; and what the will said was that Quarendon Abbey, and all the Sweetapple estates, and all the personality, all the—everything, in short, that Sir John had to leave, was to belong absolutely to his “dear wife Amicia.”

Of course, when the will was known, all the wise women of the West said, “What a shame not to

leave a penny to his lawful heir ! See what comes of marrying a siren." In saying which these very wise people quite forgot that Sir John had always been madly in love with Lady Sweetapple, while he detested his heir, as is the nature of some men who are childless. Nor did they consider that Amicia had been a good and faithful wife to Sir John. As for the wise men of the West, they did not at all agree with the wise women. They all thought Sir John had only done his duty by his wife ; and, to tell the truth, there was not one of them unmarried who would not have given his little finger to have married the siren, only she would have none of them. She had never been very fond of North Devon even in Sir John's time, as the air was too damp and the neighbours too dull ; and so, to make a very long story short, she lived mostly in London, at No. —, Lowndes Street, where it must be remembered that we are paying her a visit on the 23rd of May, 1870.

"A letter from Lady Carlton," said the siren in a soft voice, which would have melted the heart of Mentor himself. "What can Lady Carlton have to say?" and as she said this, Lady Sweetapple tossed the letter down with a grace that would have charmed any man's heart.

So the siren had breakfast, a meal which did not take long, and then she opened the letter.

“To go to High Beech on the 1st of June to meet—yes ! that is the question, to meet whom ? How provoking ! it only says to meet ‘a few friends.’ What a fortunate pair Sir John and Lady Carlton are in having a few friends ! Some people have no friends, only acquaintances or enemies. I wonder who these few friends can be, and whether there are any of my friends among them. Let me consider and guess. It doesn’t take a second to guess that Mr. Beeswing will be there. He is such a great friend of both Sir John and Lady Carlton. How happy is the man who knows really how to hold with the hare and run with the hounds ! in other words, to be equally agreeable to both husband and wife. Yes ! he will be there for certain. I don’t much like him, nor does he care for me that I can see ; but the house will never be dull where Mr. Beeswing is a guest. Who else ? Ah ! I remember,” with a hurry of voice and a slight flush of face, “Harry Fortescue will be there. He told me that Sir Thomas had asked him yesterday to go down to High Beech, and that he hoped I might be there. This, no doubt, is the invitation he meant. Yes, I will go to High Beech on the 1st of June. I am

sure I shall be very happy—when Mr. Beeswing is in the house, and Harry Fortescue as well."

Now we have seen enough of Lady Sweetapple, and we will go to Grosvenor Mansions and pay Mr. Beeswing a visit. He, too, is just up when we arrive. Had we gone first to him we should have found him in bed, for middle-aged bachelors are less early in their habits than sirens under thirty. Here we have him in his dressing-gown and slippers, a well-preserved, clean-shaven man of fifty-five.

As we have already said, Edward Beeswing was a younger son of the Earl of Port. It was a fine old Irish family, always renowned for wit and good-fellowship. Sir Edward Beeswing had a great share in negotiating the Methuen treaty, which made us, as is well known, a nation of port drinkers. The First Minister of the day, who had a dry sense of humour, and wished to reward the eminent diplomatist, gave him a pension on the Civil List by making him Hereditary Holder of the King's Cork-screw whenever it pleased his majesty to visit that part of his dominions called Ireland, and at the same time raised him to the peerage as Baron Port. For eminent public services at elections, and for docility at the time of the Union, the Baron of Port had risen to the earldom of the same name; and so some

thirty years ago, when the second Earl of Port died, Edward Beeswing, then twenty-five years of age, and one of the finest and most fashionable young men about town, found himself with an annuity of five hundred a year charged on the very encumbered estate of his elder brother, and with no other prospects. What he would have done at the present day it is impossible to say, but his elder brother, who, most luckily, was a Whig, went to Lord Melbourne and got his brother made a Commissioner of Outland Revenue, or Remembrancer of Her Majesty's Conscience, or some equally important sinecure, on which, and on his irregularly-paid annuity, he had subsisted ever since.

For the rest, he was a genial, pleasant man, equally liked by both men and women. To the last he gave good advice, founded on ample experience of all the affections of the heart, and towards the first he was never arrogant, but, on the contrary, most courteous and forbearing ; for he said, “ Though I am an old fogey, what in the world is the use of becoming as crusty as my elder brother, and of forgetting that I once was a wild young fellow, hardly ever out of difficulties ? ”

Let us hear what he says in answer to Lady Carlton. “ An invitation for the 1st of June to High

Beech. Well, I must say Lady Carlton is a most faithful friend, and so is Sir Thomas. There are always pleasant people at their parties. I am luckily disengaged, and I shall most certainly accept." So he accepted, and we may expect to see him at High Beech on the 1st of June.

Mr. and Mrs. Marjoram live, as you know, in Great Cumberland Street, Hyde Park, in a great musty old house that looked as if it had never been painted or cleaned since the time of Adam. When you were inside it, it smelt strongly of hay and apples, as though it were a loft and store-room combined. It was one of those houses, too, in which the servant who opens the door looked as though he had just got out of bed and huddled on his clothes, and, call at what hour you might, there was either a waggon of coals at the door, or a washerwoman's cart, or a dustman carting away cinders. Whether there were back-stairs or not, no one could tell, but it was a fact that, at all hours of the day, slatternly housemaids, with brooms and pails, were perpetually running up and down the front stairs. The friends of Mrs. Marjoram said it was all Mr. Marjoram's fault, he was so particular; and all Mr. Marjoram's friends agreed in laying the blame on Mrs. Marjoram, she *was* so untidy. As for ourselves, we

decline to side with either party. We respect Mr. Marjoram, and dread his wife; our only object in this story is to prevent them from quarrelling in public. As to what they may do at home we do not care a straw.

“That must wait for an answer till Mr. Marjoram comes down,” said Mrs. Marjoram. “What a shame it is that he will be always late for breakfast.”

This was at nine o’clock—an hour at which many would think a man at the end of May, in the height of the London season, need not have been abused for being five minutes late for breakfast at nine.

It so happened that, before the five minutes were over, down came Mr. Marjoram.

“Late again for prayers, Mr. Marjoram,” said his wife. “I wish you would consider what a shocking example you set to the servants.”

“My dear,” said Mr. Marjoram, “it is really not my fault this morning. Yesterday, I admit, I was a little late after that long dinner at the Mansion House; but this morning, just as I was coming down, I fell over a dust-pan which Mary had left on the landing, and I bruised my shin so that the skin is all off for two inches.”

Having said this, the unhappy Marjoram rubbed his shin, and looked imploringly for mercy.

But as the judges say to the wretches they are about to sentence to death, "If you think of mercy, you must turn your eyes to a wiser and better tribunal," there was no mercy for her husband where Mrs. Marjoram was concerned.

"And pray where were your eyes, Mr. Marjoram, when you fell over the dust-pan? You might as well say that you had fallen down-stairs because you had no legs. Why, I ask, did you not see the dust-pan? No doubt poor Mary left it there when she ran down-stairs to prayers; and if you had come down when the bell rang, you would have been here before she put down the pan, and so could not have fallen over it. The pain, therefore, which you now suffer is caused by your own sin of omission, and should be looked on rather as a salutary warning than as a cause of complaint and repining. Another time, Mr. Marjoram, no doubt you will be down to prayers before Mary has time to leave the dust-pan in your way."

After this exhortation to early rising and prayer-going, the unhappy Marjoram was suffered to eat his breakfast in silence and comparative peace. When he had finished it he was about to bolt for the door, and so secure his retreat to the hall, where he would have seized his hat and umbrella and escaped

from the house to the City. That was what he did on most mornings, except Sunday, when he was led off to church by Mrs. Marjoram. But on this particular morning it was not fated that he should so escape.

“Mr. Marjoram,” said Mrs. Marjoram in a sepulchral voice, “I have something to say to you.”

“Yes, my dear, pray say it,” said Mr. Marjoram, with a sidelong, seal-like wriggle towards the door.

“Do you then decline to hear me, Mr. Marjoram?” said his tormentor, executing a rapid flank movement, which placed her between her victim and the door.

“Oh, no, my dear, certainly not,” said Mr. Marjoram. “Only I am rather in a hurry to-day, as there is much to do in the City.”

“Here is an invitation from Lady Carlton for the 1st of June. Will you go, Mr. Marjoram?”

“I will do as you like, my dear,” said the unhappy Marjoram.

“How often have I to repeat, Mr. Marjoram, that it gives me no pleasure to go out into the world. If you do as I please, you will stay at home.”

“My dear,” said Mr. Marjoram, “I think we had better go. It will do you good to be relieved from the care of a house for a few days, and though you

will never believe me, there is no one better fitted than yourself to shine in society."

"Mr. Marjoram," said his better half, "when you married me I was perhaps what you say; but now I am a wreck, a shadow. Every age has its cares, Mr. Marjoram, and no age has more than that of a middle-aged married woman."

Was Mrs. Marjoram to be believed when she said this? If the truth be told, she was telling an awful story. She was neither a wreck nor a shadow. She slept well and ate well; had everything her own way, and ruled Mr. Marjoram with a rod of iron. In her heart she wished very much to go to High Beech, but she thought it would give her husband an advantage over her if she showed pleasure at the prospect of going, and so she made it appear as though she was going, if she went at all, solely because he wished it. All this was very wrong and cross-grained; but, alas! it is too often the way of the world. There are in this vale of tears and groans many Mrs. Marjorams.

"Well, then," said Mr. Marjoram, who began to think ruefully of his business in the City, "I suppose you will write and say we shall be very happy to go. I like Sir Thomas and Lady Carlton, and they would both like you if you would only let them."

“Oh, do not run away with the idea that it will give me the least pleasure. I am always much better at home in my own place—a woman’s place—at the head of my household.”

“But you will write and accept the invitation,” said Mr. Marjoram.

“Yes, on the understanding that I go to please you, and not expecting any satisfaction in the visit.”

Having got so far, Mr. Marjoram thought probably that he had won a great victory, for he vanished as quickly as he could, and was soon seen limping along Great Cumberland Street with his broken shin, on his way to the City.

When he was gone his domestic tyrant sat down and accepted “Dear Lady Carlton’s” invitation “with very great pleasure.”





CHAPTER V.

HARRY AND EDWARD AT BREAKFAST

EDWARD VERNON and Harry Fortescue lived in the same lodgings, in Eccleston Street, Belgravia. Thirty years ago they would have lived in chambers in the Temple or Lincoln's Inn, and they would have been much more comfortable. They would have had a clerk between them, whose chief duty would have been to stick up bits of paper in the mouth of the letter-box, "Return in half an hour," "At Westminster," "On Sessions," "On Circuit." On all which notices we need only remark that there have been cases where an unfortunate visitor has returned at intervals of thirty minutes for three successive hours, and always found the same notice staring him in the face. But in these days of progress few young barristers—for that was the profession of these bosom friends—ever live altogether at chambers. They had a set of rooms in common in Pump Court, and a clerk, as was the

case in old times, and he stuck up much the same illusory notices, as though the business of these Siamese barristers was increasing so fast that he, their clerk, would soon take a ten-roomed house—that supreme object of every clerk's ambition ; but in reality the friends lived for the most part in that street in Belgravia, and though they went sometimes to the Temple, they were not nearly so attentive to business as they might have been. In several respects their condition was strangely alike ; they were both well born, both younger sons, and both orphans. The only relation in life that either of them had was an elder brother. As for cousins, that bond of affinity which Scotchmen worship and Englishmen detest, they had none of them. No doubt it was this likeness of condition that had drawn Edward Vernon and Harry Fortescue so closely together at Eton, had continued their friendship at Oxford, and still kept them so near together in London. In one other point they were very like. They were both cursed with a competence, and that was the real reason why they were so careless in the pursuit of their profession. “Do you see that pot-house,” said Chief Justice Earwig to one of his great admirers, when they were posting out of London to York, to try twelve Luddites, afterwards to be

hanged all of a row. "Do you see that pot-house in Carey Street, Lincoln's Inn? Well, for twenty years of my life, when I was a young man, I dined every day at five o'clock, on a beef-steak, at that house. I never went into society, and never read a book when out of court, except one on law." Having told which bit of domestic history in a husky voice, the chief justice sunk into the corner of his chariot, and left his marshal and admirer to draw the inference that the law has always been a jealous mistress to those who woo her.

But certainly neither Edward Vernon nor Harry Fortescue were going to bow down before a divinity whose worship consisted in eating tough beef-steaks and drinking porter, and whose church services consisted of dry law books and musty precedents. They were prepared to do all that a young man should do towards studying his profession, provided it did not interfere with the sacred right of every young man of fashion to dine out as often as he could; and above all things, to dance as often, and as well, as he could. Certain formal rites, indeed, they cheerfully fulfilled. They entered their names as students; they ate disgusting dinners at half-past five, washed down with port wine of the vintage of 1868; they attended lectures, and went to sleep,

much in the same way as the benchers went to sleep who attended them for form's sake. They never went into any examinations. They were supposed to read in an eminent conveyancer's chambers, for which they paid him very handsome fees; but if they came, it was only to exemplify Charles Lamb's famous rule of coming late and going away early. In these chambers there were always venerable papers involving all sorts of abstruse points of law, but only one or two sallow-faced fellows, who were not cursed with a competence, ever read them. They, no doubt, will have their reward. Unless our whole judicial system is reformed from off the face of the earth, they will be vice-chancellors, and perhaps lord chancellors. If they lean to common law, they may become as great common lawyers as Chief Justice Earwig himself, always provided that their livers last, and they are not starved to death, or choked with dust by learning their profession and waiting for business. Enthusiasts in the law no doubt look on such prospects with intense delight, and they feel the same pleasure in running a precedent to book as a bold rider who is in at the death of a fox; but it was not so with those idle apprentices, Edward Vernon and Harry Fortescue. They were great dancers, and good authorities on the

Eton and Harrow match, and the Oxford and Cambridge boat-race. They could have told in a second how many times dark blue had won the race, the names of the strokes, and even of the crews, for the last ten years. I am not sure, too, that they could not have told you the names of the winners of the Derby for the last three years. In all these things they could have taken a first class in a competitive examination ; but as for law, God bless you ! in spite of all their entrance-fees, and dinner bills, and fees for the run of that eminent conveyancer's chambers—in spite, too, of that mystical call to the Bar to which they had at last eaten and paid their way—they were just as ignorant as babes unborn.

Now we know enough of them to call at No. —, Eccleston Street, and to find them sitting at breakfast. If Mr. Beeswing was later in his habits than Lady Sweetapple, Edward and Harry were much later than Mr. Beeswing. This, no doubt, is providential, for if we all had our breakfast at the same hour, what a rush there would be to wait on us and attend to our wants ! See, therefore, how short-sighted heads of families are who complain of the younger members of their family coming down so late to breakfast ! There would often be no breakfast at all, if we all appeared together ; and this

is said with all due respect to all those virtuous fathers and mothers who breakfast regularly at eight, supported by ten olive branches—five daughters on one side, and five sons on the other. It is no use their saying that they get their breakfast regularly served at that hour. For, after all, what is their breakfast? French eggs, Irish butter, cold toast, slack-baked bread, and watercresses. Always tea, and never coffee. On such fare every family would be regular, every member of it must come down early, were it only to eat as little of it as possible, and so get over the nauseous meal, and be off about his business as soon as ever he can.

But it was at no such niggardly breakfast that Edward and Harry were seated at half-past twelve on that morning of the 23rd of May, 1870. One liked tea and the other coffee, and they both liked chocolate. So they had all three. As for chocolate, it never quenches thirst; so they had that first, and then one had tea and the other coffee. Now don't hold up your hands, Mrs. Economy, and shriek out against such awful waste. Of course it was; and far better would it have been for these unearnest young men had they been living as the holy anchorites of old in the desert near the Natron Lakes—munching parched peas and writing out the Bible on goat-skins.

If we all had our way and did our duty, we might have the millennium down upon us in, say, a hundred years. But this is not a story about the millennium, and though there will be no wickedness in it, it must tell of the ways of the world, and one of the bad ways of the world is that young men who are not forced to work for their bread will not get up early if they have been dancing their legs off till four o'clock the night before. Nor is it perhaps to be wondered that two young men, who had never had a real want in their lives, should under all the circumstances make themselves as comfortable as they could. Whatever, therefore, Mrs. Economy may say, and however much she may hold up her hands, we proceed to say that the pair had fresh eggs, and devilled kidneys, and pressed beef on the table before them. Oh yes ! and there was a dish of prawns on the sideboard, which came from Charles's, and, worse still, a Strasburg pie, into which Edward Vernon was digging with a spoon at the very moment of our visit. It is a common fiction with parents of the early-to-bed-and-early-to-rise school, that going to balls saps the constitution and leads the way for an early grave. This is another of those pious frauds which should be hissed off the stage by public opinion. It is much to be

doubted whether dancing ever hurt man or woman, unless they had a heart disease. Again, how inconsequent are the enemies of balls! Does Parliament, where a number of respectable middle-aged gentlemen for the most part spend their evenings in an endless round of dulness, rarely relieved by a brilliant or even a lively debate—does Parliament, with its interminable clauses and committees, and morning sittings and late divisions, sap the constitution of our legislators and prepare them for the inroads of consumption? Why should a man, and a young man, ruin his health by meeting five nights out of the week with a number of young people of his own age, both men and women, and enjoying himself by dancing away in very pleasant company some of his superfluous energy? Do those sallow-faced students who burn the midnight oil in the worship of Themis, or whatever other goddess presides over the law, never injure their eyes, or their lives, or their looks? “Oh yes,” you say; “but that is all for the sake of science and learning.” All respect, we say, to science and learning; but consider, if we were all scientific and learned, what a place of torment this world would be. Besides, we can’t all be scientific and learned; our heads are not strong enough for it. We can’t all be as wise as Pythagoras or Socrates,

though we may look a deal more handsome than the last philosopher, who, if there are actions in the Elysian Fields, ought long ago to have instructed Gorgias or Protagoras to take proceedings against the sculptor who carved his bust. The result of this long discussion therefore is, that there is room for every one on earth; and just as in the natural world there are elephants, and birds of paradise, and owls, and beetles, so in the world of society there are men who are meant to work, and men who are meant to play and look pretty. Two such pretty men were Edward and Harry, and it seems to us just as natural that Edward should be digging into a Strasburg pie at half-past twelve, as that at that very same hour, in Mr. Sheepskin's chambers, in Pump Court, their fellow-students, who were not as lazy as themselves, should have already mastered several precedents, which they had duly entered in a big book bound in rough calf.

“Rather jolly this!” said Edward. “Here is an invitation to High Beech. I should so like to see Alice Carlton again. She’ll be a nice girl when she has got over the shyness of her first season.”

“Of course Lady Carlton has asked me too,” said Harry. “Just look at my letters while I am digging out this truffle. Certainly that fellow, Artzner,

does make most famous pies. Are they really all made out of the livers of geese? I say, old fellow, what a lot of geese there must be in Strasburg."

"Yes, and in London too," said Edward. "What a pity it is that we two can't set up a pie manufactory, and boil down the livers of all the geese we know."

"It wouldn't pay, Edward. There are too many of them. Goose pies would become a drug, as they say of money in the City articles of the newspapers. We should never get rid of them."

"It would be worth trying if they weren't so unwholesome. Chances are, after we had killed our geese and made their livers into pies, some fool of a doctor, bribed by Mother Goose herself, would write a letter to the *Times*, telling how a patient of his ate a goose-liver pie last Christmas Day, and died out of hand, with never so much time for repentance as to make his will, thus cutting his medical attendant off from that expected legacy."

"Don't be bitter, Edward, and don't abuse the faculty. Who can tell how soon we may want their help? What do you think that stupid old Lady Proudfoot said to me last night?"

"Sure I can't tell—something nasty, I daresay," said Edward.

“Why, she came up with an air of great concern, just as I was taking Miss Frolick down to supper, and said, ‘Dear me, Mr. Fortescue, I should never have known you again—how thin and pale you have got! This all comes from reading the law, I suppose.’”

“Just like her!” said Edward. “All because you did not dance with Miss Proudfoot. But how, I ask, can any one dance with her daughter? She has no ear, can’t dance, clings to you when you waltz like a wet blanket, and is besides very ugly, and without a word to say for herself.”

“At any rate,” said Harry, “that’s not the way to make me dance with her. As for being thin and pale, we both deny it. First, about the thinness—wasn’t we, to our disgust, more than half a stone heavier than we had ever been in our lives when we were last weighed? And, so far as paleness goes, I think if we only look in the glass we shall see that we are as blooming as roses.”

As he said this, Harry Fortescue looked at himself in the glass, which even though it was a lodging-house glass, and very apt to represent features and faces all awry, could not fail to reflect the form and face of a very handsome young man.

“There is no use putting oneself out at what old

women say, Edward," said Harry. "Let them rave, as Tennyson says. They can't talk away our health or youth. The age of witches is over. They can't stick pins into waxen figures of us and make us waste slowly away; and so, old fellow, let us snap our fingers at Lady Proudfoot and all her works."

"Wisest plan," said Edward, "is not to snap your fingers at any woman, old or young. If they can't bewitch us, old women can ruin our characters with their tongues. Best take my rule, Harry: be good friends with young women, and show respect to the old: and that was why, in spite of all those wicked inventions of hers, you might have seen me taking a spin round the room with Miss Proudfoot after supper; only you could not see us, for you were flirting with Lady Sweetapple in the conservatory."

"Lady Sweetapple is a very charming woman," said Harry; "but what shall we do about High Beech? Of course we shall both be too happy to go. They are very charming people, and we both like the girls."

"But you don't know whether you are asked, Harry," said Edward. "You haven't opened your letter. You take it all for granted."

"Don't I?" cried Harry. "I should just think

I was. I met Sir Thomas yesterday afternoon, and he asked me in person ; and part of that flirtation which you accuse me of having had with Lady Sweetapple last night, was spent in telling her that I was going to High Beech, and I wished she were going too."

"Very mean to keep a fellow in the dark all this while," said Edward. "Why, I might have accepted another invitation, and so missed seeing that charming Alice."

"Alas! I may turn the tables on you," said Harry, "and ask how I was to know that they were going to ask you. Sir Thomas said nothing about it."

"You might have taken it for granted," said Edward. "But never mind, it is all right; and we will both go, and we shall be very happy with the Carltons for a day or two."

"I wonder if they will ask Lady Sweetapple," said Harry half aloud.

"Oh, Harry," said Edward, putting on the air and accent of a Mentor, "how often have I warned you against the fascination of widows! Listen to what one of the old fathers says on that subject. It must be true, for I heard it at divinity lectures at Oxford. 'All women,' says St. Cyprian, 'are vile

reptiles, which should be crushed without mercy by right-minded men. But as for widows, they are venomous snakes, who twine themselves round young men, and drag them down to hell.' Be warned, I say."

"I don't believe in St. Cyprian, Edward. Now I think of it, he was a black man, and what should he know about white widows? I don't know why you should be so solemn about Lady Sweetapple; but I think I can promise you, so far as your friend Cyprian is concerned, that if I ever marry a widow, it sha'n't be a black one."





CHAPTER VI.

COUNT PANTOUFFLES AND COLONEL AND MRS.
BARKER.

WHEN Count Pantouffles received Lady Carlton's letter, he was in ecstasies, as all the members of that distinguished family invariably are. No reader is to ask to what legation Count Pantouffles was attached. He came of a race which belongs to all nationalities alike, and we have all of us met, all over Germany, before it was united, with a *Graf von Pantoffel*, the very counterpart of the Count Pantouffles of our story. Any of you that chooses to take the trouble may run him to earth in imagination, but beware of betaking yourselves to the *Almanach de Gotha*, or of fixing on an individual what is in reality the portrait of a class.

Count Pantouffles lived in a little house in a by-street in Mayfair—that is to say, he slept there, and there he had a cup of coffee and a rusk before his breakfast, but all the rest of the

day he spent at the Diplomatic Club. He was a tall, handsome man, with the blackest hair and best-trimmed moustache and beard in the world. His clothes fitted him like wax, and he spoke English tolerably. He was not very original or very bright, but we English must recollect that we are most of us not very shining lights when we speak the language of another country. None of you shall ever know what the Count's own language was; and, above all things, you are not to suppose he was a Frenchman because his name was Pantouffles; for are there not, as we have said, Pantouffles in all the countries under the sun? He had been so long in the country, though he was not at all old, that some people thought the country from which he was accredited to the Court of St. James had forgotten his existence; but in all probability he fulfilled his mission to the supreme satisfaction of his sovereign, and that, and no other, was the reason why he was not removed from England. Popular he most decidedly was; most men and all women liked him. He had plenty of small-talk, a serene smile, and filled a gap at a table more ornamentally than most men. His great merit was that, though he was full of engagements, he was almost always disengaged. How he managed this most difficult

point it is hard to say. Many people fancied he must often have eaten two dinners on the same day ; but as no one could say that he had ever been with him at those two dinners, that fact, if it were a fact, remained a supposition incapable of proof.

He too, when he got Lady Carlton's invitation, sat down and accepted it at once.

So now they have all accepted but Colonel and Mrs. Barker. The colonel had been a schoolfellow of Sir Thomas Carlton. Then, when the baronet went to Oxford, "Jerry" Barker, as he was called at school, went into the army. As all the ways in the world lead to Rome, so all soldiering, sooner or later, ends in India ; and to India Mr. Barker proceeded in due course. He was then a lieutenant in her Majesty's —th Foot Fire-eaters, and he had not long been in Benares before he fell a victim—not to the cholera or jungle fever, but—to a heart disease ; in other words, he married Mrs. Barker, the daughter of the general who commanded the station, and who was confessedly the beauty of the cantonments. That was not one of the unfortunate unions of this world. No one could have had a more devoted husband than Mrs. Barker, and no wife was more constant than Mr. Barker's. She was not one of those recreant soldiers' wives who

leave their husbands to shelter in India while they return to England to visit their friends. Of course they were sometimes parted, as when Captain Barker was ordered to Burmah, or, later still, when as major he marched towards the Punjab in the first Sikh war. But, even on this last occasion, Mrs. Barker was not far from her husband, for she took up a position at Delhi, and there awaited the result of the campaign, confident that when Major Barker rode at the head of her Majesty's —th Foot Fire-eaters there was not a Sikh that would dare to stand against them. Nor was the true wife's confidence misplaced. The —th Regiment covered itself with glory, and when almost the last round shot fired by the Sikhs, as they sullenly retired from the bloody field of Ferozeschah, took off the head of its lieutenant-colonel, Major Barker, who had gone through the hottest fire without a scratch, stepped at once into the vacant command, “*vice* Smith,” as the *Gazette* said, “killed in action.”

And so this faithful pair had gone on increasing in love, as medals and crosses shone thick on Colonel Barker's breast, till the time for retirement came, when the gallant colonel sold his commission, and returned to England to vegetate on his well-won laurels. Together that husband and wife formed a

perfect picture of well-tried conjugal love. Colonel Barker was convinced that there never was, either in antiquity or modern times, such a woman as Mrs. Barker; and woe betide the unhappy wight who was unlucky enough to insinuate that any warrior of classical, mediæval, or recent times was comparable to Colonel Barker, either as a man, a husband, or a soldier, in Mrs. Barker's hearing. Dear, good woman! she even adored his old uniforms, and used often to hold them up to the admiring eyes of her female friends at a tea-party, with the exclamation, "That's what I call a uniform! You should have seen Colonel Barker wearing it as he rode at the head of the regiment out of the Hazareebagh."

Some married couples like each other less the longer they live together. They are like the North and South Poles—in the same world, indeed, but as far as possible removed from each other. Not so Colonel and Mrs. Barker. They were inseparable. They got up together, and came down to prayers at the very same moment. Mrs. Barker knew how long her husband took to dress to a second, and when she heard him cough—for he coughed like a good soldier, as it were by clockwork—she said to herself, "Now he has done shaving. He always coughs when he

lays down his razor. That was just how he used to cough in cantonments." When he coughed again, it was a sign that he had buckled his stock. And you must know that the colonel coughed, not because he had anything the matter with his throat or lungs, but because he had always coughed at these particular moments all his life ; and he could no more have laid down his razor or buckled his stock without coughing than some people can get through the Athanasian Creed without gaping in church. Why they do it they cannot tell ; and so it was with Colonel Barker. He could not tell why he coughed, but he always coughed all the same.

When they came down to breakfast there were no such scenes and bickerings as those which rendered Mr. Marjoram's life so miserable. On the contrary, it was Mrs. Barker's duty and pleasure to make her dear colonel as comfortable as possible, and if she ever is the cause of his death, it will be by kindness. At that breakfast-table was always to be found the newest milk, the richest cream, the freshest eggs, the best bacon, the nicest little omelettes, the best-made tea and coffee, and though last not least, the whitest table-cloth in the whole parish of Paddington. Now, none of you turn up your noses at Paddington, as if it were an abode only fit for owls and bats.

Many good people live in Paddington, though it *is* a long way off, and though it was said that Mrs. Barker had fixed on Paddington for their residence, in order that she might keep the Colonel away from the United Service and Oriental Clubs, and so have him all to herself—we believe it was a wicked story, and that they only set up their tent in Paddington because they liked it better than any other part of London.

“Jerry, dear,” said Mrs. Barker, “what do you think? Here is an invitation for the 1st of June from Lady Carlton. Shall we go?”

“Of course we will, if you like it. Tom Carlton is now almost my oldest friend; but mind, Mary, you have a new dress, and be sure you take with you the emerald brooch which I bought you after the capture of the Ram Chowder’s hill fort.”

“As if I was likely to forget either the one or the other, Jerry! I always take a pride in wearing that emerald, which reminds me of your valour; and as for the new dress, we do not go out so often that I cannot afford one when Lady Carlton is good enough to ask us to High Beech.”

“Very well, dear,” said the faithful colonel; “and now let us have breakfast. It must be quite five minutes after the regulation time,” and then, with-

out more ado, Colonel Barker charged the pieces of resistance marshalled on the table with as much determination as if they had been the Ram Chowder's hill fort itself.

At last, when the enemy had been utterly routed and reduced to confess the supremacy of his gastric juice, Colonel Barker paused, and looking up kindly to his wife, who had long since ceased her operations against the common foe, he said—

“By-the-bye, this is the day for the annual meeting of the Curry and Rice Club, of which you know I am an original member. They are going to propose a new rule, that no one shall be admitted a member who cannot prove by medical certificate that he has not had at least one gastric fever. They say it will cause more vacancies, and that if it is carried, new candidates won't have to wait for ten years before the ballot. Never heard such stuff in my life. Look at me, did you ever know me have an attack of the liver, let alone a gastric fever? Never felt bilious in my life but once, and that was when the Sikhs cut down our sergeant-major and poor Ensign Griffin, and almost carried off the regimental colours. We soon got it back, though; but for a minute I felt my liver swelling, and I am sure my face was yellow as a gold mohur.”

“ You may well call it nonsense,” echoed Mrs. Barker. “ Instead of changing the rules, I should change the committee. Go and vote against them by all means, and mind you come back to dinner, and if you see an old friend at the club you can bring him too. Never mind if he has or has not had a gastric fever.”

“ I mean to go and vote,” said Colonel Barker. And vote he did, and the new rule was thrown out; but before he left his house this most courteous colonel and devoted husband had an interview with his cheque-book, and presented Mrs. Barker with a draft for thirty pounds. “ There, my dear, I dare-say Cox will honour that, and now be sure you are quite tidy on the 1st of June, when we go down to the Carltons.”

“ Never was such a husband ! ” said Mrs. Barker, as she followed him with longing eyes down Petersburg Place, or Moscow Road, or Kossuth Crescent, or some of the many places, roads, and crescents which make Paddingtonia a terror to benighted diners-out, and a fruitful source of overcharging to extortionate cabmen.

In a very short time the gallant colonel hailed an omnibus, which took him to the Regent Circus; but before he climbed into it, he said more than once,

“There never was such a wife as mine! What a lucky man I was when I married Mrs. Barker at Benares!”

How we wish that Mr. and Mrs. Marjoram could only read this story and lay it to heart! Perhaps we ought to say, “Mrs. Marjoram alone,” for, as we have seen, Mr. Marjoram would have been in all likelihood still “sweet” Marjoram, had he been married to a woman as fitted to make him happy as Mrs. Barker had proved herself to be by a long course of devotion to Colonel Barker.





CHAPTER VII.

THE CARLTONS AT HOME.

SO they are all coming," said Sir Thomas to Lady Carlton.

"Yes, all. Not one excuse. How delightful it will be!"

This was said at breakfast on the 25th, when Florence and Alice were present.

"And do you think it so delightful?" said her father to his eldest daughter.

"Delightful is a strong word, papa, you know," said Florence. "I am not so fond of superlatives as mamma; but still I think I shall like it very well."

"And you, Alice?"

"Oh," said Alice, "I am not so positive, or perhaps I ought rather to say so comparative, as Florry. I agree with mamma in her superlatives, and think it will be most delightful."

"That's all right," said Sir Thomas. "I see it will be a very pleasant party; but we must ask

some of the neighbours, or we shall have too few at dinner."

"I thought, papa, I heard you say something once about a party not exceeding nine—the number of the Muses. As it is, we shall be thirteen—an unlucky number, and ever so many above the sacred number nine."

"That was a rule laid down by the ancient Greeks, Florry: a country in which every man and woman was agreeable and amusing. But in this cold country our wits are not so bright; and so, to get more clever people together, we are obliged to ask twenty, and even then we may think ourselves lucky if we get one in ten really worth listening to."

"I am sure we have got two out of our thirteen worth listening to," said Alice, who would have gone on to utter their names had not her sister stopped her mouth with her hand.

"No, no, Alice; don't say any more. Leave papa to guess."

"I'm not going to do any such thing," said Sir Thomas. "I should think there were many more than two out of the thirteen very pleasant and agreeable. But it is fortunate we are not all bound to agree in thinking the same person pleasant, or this life would be a weary one."

At this point of the conversation Sir Thomas exclaimed—

“ Bless me! there’s the T-cart. I must be off;” and in three minutes he was rattling away to the station.

When her husband was gone, Lady Carlton supplied his place.

“ But I should like to know who the two are that Alice has picked out. Might I know? ”

“ Oh, it’s no secret, I am sure,” said Florence. “ Alice means Edward Vernon and Harry Fortescue.”

“ Both very nice young men,” said Lady Carlton, “ but rather too idle to please your papa. He says he is sure they will neither of them ever be lord chancellor.”

“ Oh, mamma! ” broke in Florence, “ who could ever wish to see Harry Fortescue lord chancellor, sitting on a woolsack in a long robe, and with a flowing wig? For my part, I like him much better as he is. Fancy a lord chancellor dancing! But Harry Fortescue does dance so beautifully.”

“ There you are wrong, Florence,” said Alice. “ I’m sure I have read somewhere in English history that Sir Christopher Hatton danced, and he was lord chancellor.”

“Oh, but that was a long time ago, when lord chancellors weren’t so old and ugly as they are now. No, I could not bear to see Harry Fortescue lord chancellor.”

“Make your mind easy, my darling,” said Lady Carlton; “there is no fear of such a dreadful thing. You will dance many times with him before he is raised to the woolsack.”

After this there was a pause in the conversation, till Alice said—

“Mamma, who is my neighbour?”

“My dear,” said Lady Carlton, “what a question! In one sense every one is your neighbour.”

“Yes, I know that; that’s very like what the Catechism says. But I mean now who is my neighbour in the sense of this dinner-party on the 2nd of June? You know papa said we must ask the neighbours; and, as I shall have to write the notes, I want to know who our neighbours are.”

“Let me see,” said Lady Carlton. “We must ask the Pennyroyals, and we won’t ask Lord and Lady Bigod. They have but one idea between them, and that is of the dignity of the Bigods, who, as we are sick of hearing, came in with the Conqueror. They do well enough in town, but we really cannot ask them in the country. Then

there's Mr. Succado, the great sugar-baker, who lives in Mincing Lane, and who is a friend of your papa's in the City. He is too vulgar. We won't have him. Then there's Mr. and Mrs. Rubrick, the incumbent of the district church; we haven't asked them ever so long. He is very gentleman-like, though he is so very 'high;' and she never commits herself, for she never opens her mouth. Well, we will have them too," said Lady Carlton. "That makes seventeen. Now we only want two more, and who shall those two be?"

"I know," said Florence. "We will ask Mr. Sonderling, that strange German gentleman, who sings so beautifully, and speaks English so badly; and Miss Markham, our dear old maid. She is really too delightful! We must have her on the 1st of June, too, or we shall sit down thirteen."

"That will do capitally," said Lady Carlton; "and now, Alice, do, like a good girl, write these notes, and send a groom round with them. They ought to go out without fail to-day."

With these words Lady Carlton left her daughters to go up-stairs to their own room, while she went into the conservatory to look after her flowers.

"What do you think of the party now, Florry?" said Alice, when they had reached what was called

the young ladies' room. Once it had been a day-nursery. Then, as the governess succeeded the nurse, it became a schoolroom ; and when Miss Stokes retreated, as we have said, a year or two before, it became a studio and sanctum for the sisters. On the right hand was their bed-room, for they were old-fashioned enough to sleep in the same room ; and on the left was Palmer's room ; and if you wish to know who Palmer was, she was their lady's-maid. Happy young ladies, who could do not only with one bed-room, but with one lady's-maid ! What a comfort it would be in country houses if all young ladies and their maids could be stowed away in such small compass !

“What do I think of the party now, Alice ?” repeated Florence. “I think it very nice. My mind would be quite easy if it weren't that Lady Sweetapple is coming. Mr. Sonderling is not very handsome, but he is very odd and very clever : don't you think, Alice, he would make a good second husband for Lady Sweetapple ?”

“No, I don't, dear, if Harry Fortescue is in the way. Tell me, now, why don't I feel as anxious about Edward Vernon as you do about Harry Fortescue ? I don't break my heart when I see him dancing with any one else, and yet I have

seen you bite your bouquet to pieces if Harry takes so much as one turn with Lady Sweetapple."

"Alice," said Florence with an air of great solemnity, "that's because you are young and giddy, and without experience. You don't know so much of the ways of this wicked world of fashion as I do. How can you, when I have been out one whole season and a half, and you half a season? Another thing is, that, so far as I can see, Edward Vernon never dances with Lady Sweetapple. I wish he did, for then Harry would dance less with her. Edward is what I call a general, and Harry a particular, dancer. Edward dances with every one that can dance and is good-looking. That I don't object to at all; but Harry dances often with the same people, and over and over again with one, and that one is Lady Sweetapple, and that's what I don't like."

As Florence Carlton said this, the tears began to roll down her cheeks.

"Now, now, don't take on so, darling, or I shall never get these letters finished. Why are you so jealous? Do you think, now, that Harry Fortescue, a young man of sense and good feeling, would ever marry a widow?"

"As for that," sobbed Florry, "when I see her so bewitching I begin to think she isn't a widow at all,

and that makes me tremble; for of course Harry would never marry a widow."

"Of course not," said Alice. "That's just what I said. Harry and Edward belong to one class, and that is ours, and Lady Sweetapple belongs to another, and that isn't ours, and so if Harry and Edward belong to us they can't belong to her. Don't you see, darling?"

"I don't see what you say, so much as I feel it. I am sure if what you say isn't true it ought to be true; but for all that I wish Lady Sweetapple were not coming to High Beech."

"I am sure, if wishing would keep her away, she should never come here," said Alice; "for though I defy her to touch Edward's heart, it does put me out to see you so vexed, my pet. But dry your eyes like a good child, for I must ring for Palmer, and I don't want her to see you with your eyes as swollen as gooseberries."

So Florry dried her eyes as she was bid, and in due time Palmer appeared—a nice buxom woman of thirty—and carried off the notes with strict injunctions that a groom on horseback was to deliver and bring back answers in each case.

"Dear me, Miss Florry," said Palmer, "how the wind has caught your face and eyes! To look at

you, one would have thought you had been bursting out crying; and yet there have been no wind to-day."

"Well, Palmer," said Florry, "and if I have been crying, what does that matter? Must one always be laughing? Mayn't one cry sometimes by way of a change?"

"I'd far liever see you laughing, my bonny bird, than crying," said the faithful Palmer, who had been born and brought up in the family of Sir Thomas. "They used to say that when women cried, it mattered nothing; but I say it matters a deal when you cry, for you're one of the laughing sort altogether."

"Well, well, Palmer," said Alice, coming to the rescue, "we must all cry a gallon of tears before we die, as the proverb says, and these tears are shed by Florry to help to fill the measure. She has shed so few she is afraid lest death should overtake her before the gallon is full."

"As for that, Miss Alice," said Palmer, "I wouldn't begin too soon. I would see if I couldn't cry them all at the end of my life, when it doesn't so much signify if one's eyes are red, and one's face swollen up."

By this time Florry's face had resumed its usual

expression, and almost as soon as Palmer had given the letters to the groom, no one could have told that she had shed a tear.

“How do you look? No! not the least of a fright. And all about nothing, you know. How do you know that Harry cares the least for Lady Sweet-apple, even though he does dance now and then with her?”

All this time you have heard nothing about the looks of these two young ladies. Florence was the taller, as she was the elder, of the two. Very well grown, so that a very aquatic young man of their acquaintance, a Cambridge man, and in the third Trinity, could find no better words to express his admiration of her figure than to exclaim, “What a splendid No. 7 she’d make in our boat!” She was dark, with large brown eyes, rather a thick nose, and full lips. Her face would have been heavy had it not been that it was enlivened with the most cheerful and varying expression. It was not at all certain that she would not have been set down as “that tall plain girl,” had it not been for the endless play of feeling which passed across her face; and in this respect Florence Carlton was an example of the truth of the remark that expression is to features what the soul is to the body. “Pretty?” that genera-

tion of backbiters, the College of Old Cats, used to say when describing her over their tea, "Pretty? Why, she hasn't a single good feature, except her white teeth. Who can be pretty with such a nose and such thick lips? See if she isn't a downright fright when she's old."

But in spite of this ukase of the venerable college, almost every one else was convinced that Florence Carlton was a very pretty girl, though it would have puzzled them to prove it by picking her features to pieces. She had a great advantage, too, in being beautifully made. She had small, but not too small, hands and feet; her arms were models for roundness and symmetry; they were fair and white, too, and never looked the colour of red pieces of raw meat, like some other arms which might be named, and which might just as well be hung up on hooks at Mr. Lidstone's shop. Not long ago, indeed, one of these underdone young ladies let the lions see her arms at the Zoo on Sunday, and the consequence was such a commotion and fury among the great carnivora as never was known in the Regent's Park before.

"What are they roaring at?" asked the raw-boned innocent of the respected keeper who watches over the digestion of the lions.

"Why, ma'am, if you must know, they're a-roaring at your arms. It has reminded them of their feeding hour, and that makes them wery savage, for they ain't fed till four, and it's now barely two o'clock."

Then, as the roaring rather increased as the young lady retreated, much alarmed: "There, they don't like that, miss. They've got quite fond of you like. Just for all the world as when a mamma puts her little boy close to the bars that he may have a good sight of the lion, she forgets, bless her heart, that lions have feelings likes all the rest of us, and happetites too. Then Nero falls to roaring, as much as to say to the old lady, 'Much obliged to you, ma'am, for bringing me such a fat little boy;' for he thinks, of course, I'm going to open the cage and give him the boy; and when he finds he is not to have him, he falls a-roaring twice as loud, for lions can't bear to be disappointed any more than us humans."

But to return from this digression on raw arms, which it were much to be desired could be cured like warts, or stuttering, or indigestion. Florry Carlton's arms were not red, and in every other respect she was a charming young woman. She was rather tall, but so well made that no one ob-

served it; or rather, they only remarked it to her advantage, and never when her height could be called an objection.

Her sister Alice was shorter, and slighter, and prettier. She had red-brown hair, or brown chestnut, or auburn, or whatever colour that beautiful hair is called, the staple of which seems to be brown inside, powdered with gold and turned up with gold at the ends. Her eyes were dark blue, and if you ask why hers were of that hue while her sister's were brown, the answer is, no one can tell. We have no authority to inform us how the paints are mixed which turn us out this or that colour and complexion after we are born. Sometimes, indeed, the father or the mother seems to have all power over the children in this respect; but very often they are like neither of them, and we have to go back to grandpapa's picture in the library, or to great-grandmamma's in the gallery up-stairs, before we can say, "Why, here is Frances to the life a hundred years ago: her eyes, and hair, and hue. She only wants to have her hair dressed in powder, and her body in hoops, and farthingale, and lace, to be the very image of her great-grandmamma."

All the features of Alice Carlton were better and finer than those of her sister. Her lips were thinner,

and altogether she had a firmer mouth and jaw. But the serious character of the lower part of her face was relieved by the perpetual sunlight of her brow. Her eyes were so bright and lively that her lips could not fail to smile under the influence of the sunny regions above. But when her lips were won to smiling, the whole Alice seemed to be a thing of smiles and grace. There was no use resisting her influence. She became magnetic, and even old Grumps, at the Sarcophagus Club, who was never seen to smile except when he gloated over his dinner, must have caught the infection at seeing her, and smiled like all the rest of the world. This is what the Greeks meant by the Cestus of Venus, which drew all men to her; and this is what the Germans call *Anmuth*—that nameless grace of body, face, and form that wins men over to women, body and soul, and makes them their abject slaves. A very dangerous gift and power, you will say, if placed in bad hands. In which observation we quite agree, only of course neither the writer nor the reader have ever met with such a wicked woman.

As to her figure and form, Alice Carlton was much the same as her elder sister. That was a well-made family. There were no hump backs, or curved spines, or bow legs among the Carltons. As

soon as they could walk they stood straight. When they ran alone, their nurses were never afraid that their ankles would turn in. Every step they took on mother Earth seemed to give them a firmer hold of her, and she repaid their confidence by never tripping them up.





CHAPTER VIII.

HOW THEY ALL SPENT THEIR TIME TILL THE FIRST
OF JUNE.

AND now that we have told you so much about the characters which will play a part in this story, let us pass over the days which lay between the 25th of May and the 1st of June. We all know and remember what May was in 1870, and what it usually is in London—a dry, cold, cheerless month, in which green peas are cut off by frost like a knife, in which amateur gardeners are in agonies about their bedding-out plants, and in which missionary meetings and sore throats abound. If we can remember anything of last year—if the great sponge of the war has not passed so thoroughly over our memories as to wipe out all recollection of May 1870, we may recollect that it was fine, and bright, and dry. The sun had such power that June came in with a burst of flowers, and that green peas out of the open ground were fit to eat by Ascot Races. The month of May, therefore, in

1870, or at least the latter part of it, was by no means true to its character, and its last days were very pleasant. That they were fully enjoyed by Lady Sweetapple in her way, by Edward Vernon and Harry Fortescue in their way, as well as by Count Pantouffles in his way, and by Colonel and Mrs. Barker and the Marjorams in theirs, was of course to be expected.

Lady Sweetapple spent those days in driving about like a meteor from shop to shop, and from house to house, ordering dresses and hats, driving even Madame Coupe Baptiste out of her wits by her fanciful demands. "Les veuves sont toujours si exigeantes," said that renowned modiste, after Lady Sweetapple had paid her her tenth visit in five days. "And then, to think of all the silks and satins ruined, absolutely *abimés*, by her vagaries." However, the consolation was that Lady Sweetapple would find them all in the bill, and that if she was her own mistress, she was also her own paymaster. At night she appeared at two balls and a crush, and once she went to see *M.P.*, with a chosen party of four, in the stalls. At both the balls she met Edward Vernon and Harry Fortescue, and we are sorry to add that Florry Carlton's peace of mind would have been much troubled had she known that after one

of those balls, at which Harry actually danced twice with Lady Sweetapple, she asked him to make one of that party of four at the Prince of Wales's Theatre. When it was known, however, that the other couple was made up by old Lady Sightseer and her indefatigable husband, it must be confessed that with such chaperons there could be no scandal about Harry and the pretty widow.

As for Count Pantouffles, he did as the noble family of Pantouffles have always done. He got up early, and his valet brought him a cup of coffee and a rusk. Then he made his toilette till eleven. At half-past he was at the Diplomatic Club, as fresh as paint. There he ate an enormous breakfast. When he had digested it, he went to the legation, and found, as usual, little or nothing to do. Sometimes he had to translate, or to cut out, in order to hand it over to a translator, a passage out of the *Official Journal* of the court from which Count Pantouffles had been accredited, stating that "Our august sovereign has proceeded to the mountains for change of air, whence he is expected to return with health sufficiently recruited to resume the cares of government in about six weeks." Or, "On Tuesday last, the king, our august sovereign, received the ministers of England and France. In

the evening there was a grand dinner at court, to which the same ministers had the honour of being invited." When these astounding pieces of information had been duly turned into English by the sworn translator of the legation, it was the duty of Count Pantouffles to hand them over to his chief, having first put them into an envelope; after which the said chief, the Marquis of Parva Sapientia, embodied them in a despatch, and drove off to the Foreign Office to communicate it to the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, and after having read it to inform him that if he chose he might have a copy of it—an offer which, in nine cases out of ten, was respectfully declined.

While the Marquis of Parva Sapientia was thus employed, Count Pantouffle's labours for the day were over. He returned to the club and had luncheon. Then he went home and made, again with the help of his valet, his afternoon toilette. By this time it was about five o'clock. After that hour he either paid visits or showed himself in the park, standing and gazing at nothing in particular by the side of the drive. . But though you thought he saw nothing, there never was so quick-sighted a man as Count Pantouffles for any of his acquaintances, and it really was a sight to see him take off his hat and make a

bow. There can be little doubt, in fact, that for this only Count Pantouffles was created—to instruct the world in bowing. It was said in his own country that the first Count Pantouffles, who always held the emperor's slippers when the Holy Roman Emperor was crowned, invented the art of bowing ; by which it is not to be supposed that there were no bows before his time, any more than no Pantouffles, but that he so improved the art, that after him all the bows that had ever been made were as though they had never existed. After his day the art became hereditary in his family, and if he had lived in China, he and his descendants would have been appointed at once “the Emperor's own Bower,” and be entitled to wear six duck's feathers in their caps and eat their dinners off yellow china.

But this bow of Pantouffles—what was it ? That is very difficult to say. It was a thing to see and not to describe. When Count Pantouffles bowed, it was done with a rapidity and precision which no master of the ceremonies could have ever approached. Abroad, where such things are more valued, alas ! than in this democratic country, the count, if he could have made up his mind to prostitute his talents for filthy lucre, might have made a handsome income by giving lessons in bowing. But even here it was

appreciated, and we have often seen Count Pantouffles watched in the Row by a knot of ardent admirers who were trying to catch the trick of his remarkable performance, and as soon as he had bowed twenty times, rushed off into secluded parts of the park and began to practise the art of bowing *à la Pantouffles*.

After he had bowed enough—he has often said he bowed out ten new hats in the year—Count Pantouffles went back to the club to read the evening papers. After that, in the winter, he sat in an easy-chair by the fire, and talked of the weather and other abstruse subjects with his acquaintances. In the summer he sat by the open window, and smiled and showed his beautiful teeth to the passers-by. Did he bow then? What a question! Don't you know it is the rudest thing you can do, to bow to any one out of window? It is worse than looking at the new moon through glass, cutting your hair with the waning moon, sending the wine round against the sun, or any other well-known fatal acts. Merely to do it once would subject a man to the minor ostracism of society. He would never be invited to dinner, but only to breakfast or an occasional drum, and a repetition of the offence would consign a man to the utter darkness of his own vulgar habits, for no decent person would ever ask him into their house. When

he had smiled sufficiently in summer, or warmed himself enough in winter, Count Pantouffles went home and dressed for dinner. It is much to be doubted if there ever was such an exhibition of simple elegance as that afforded by Count Pantouffles when he was going out to dinner. His clothes were so well made, his moustache was so black, his hair was so well brushed—he always wore it parted down the middle, and, listen all ye bald-pates, he had plenty of it. His shirt fitted so well—they always came from Paris; whither, whenever he wanted a new set, he went to be measured. Then it was so well washed. Hear that, ye washerwomen! And his neckcloth was so well tied, and his boots were so glossy, and his crush hat—seldom, alas! used for bowing unless when he went to play or opera—yes, his crush hat, that, too, fitted him so well, though he often said it was the hardest thing to find a well-fitted Gibus. Altogether, he was a perfect picture of what a diplomatist ought to be in the nineteenth century, and there was not a lady's-maid in the land who would not have fallen in love with Count Pantouffles if she had seen him stepping into a Hansom at eight o'clock, going out to dinner with his glass in his eye.

The first thing that Count Pantouffles did on

entering the drawing-room was, of course, to make a bow to the lady of the house. It was not so grand an operation as his bow with the hat, and no doubt, had the usages of society permitted it, the count would have made his crush hat fly out with a start, put it on his head, and bowed his best bow to the lady; but unfortunately the original Count Pantouffles had omitted, in the first glory of his discovery, to secure for himself, from the Holy Roman Emperor, the everlasting hereditary right to wear his hat in all countries and societies. Had he only done that, we should have beheld our Count Pantouffles wearing a real beaver hat or a silk hat all through dinner, and so putting Turks, Persians, and Armenians completely in the background. As it is, his descendants have lost that invaluable privilege, and society has been deprived of the advantage of seeing them bow at night as well as by day. As for the Turks, Persians, and Armenians of whom we have spoken, it is well known that they never lift their caps from their heads; but what is the use of a diplomatist wearing a cap on his head except to show the grace with which he can take it off and put it on again?

But to return. Count Pantouffles' in-door bow was dignified and stately; not a mere nod or bob, but an inclination of the body as well as a bending of the

neck. It was exactly what a good butler would do when he announces the important fact that "dinner is served." And indeed, one of the puzzles of life, and one of those mysteries which belong to the outward show of things, is how to tell a really good well-dressed butler from a guest at a banquet. To judge by their looks, many are the butlers who ought to take their place at the table, and many are the guests who, judged by the same criterion, ought to be butlers, only they would, we are afraid, hardly be fit for the place. We know one butler, indeed, of whom it is hard to say whether he looks most like a high-bred English peer, an Austrian general, or a first-class French diplomatist. It is quite a shock to our sense of outward propriety and that worship of appearance which is our besetting sin, to think that behind our chair is standing this most finished gentleman, ready to pour out champagne to any lout who may be invited to the table, because he and his forefathers have vegetated on the same estate for centuries.

But to return to Count Pantouffles and to be done with him. Nothing can be more faultless than his behaviour. He walks off with his allotted lady like a piece of cunning clockwork; but before doing so he shows signs of animation by looking into the

glass, to see if his neckcloth is right, and his hair smoothly parted. If he could, he would stand there and perhaps die, like Narcissus, staring at his own face and forgetting his dinner. But the rest push him on in order of precedence, and he takes his seat in the dining-room. During the meal he says little, and eats a great deal; but what he says is ushered in by such a show of white teeth and such waxwork smiles, that the lady to whom he belongs pronounces Count Pantouffles charming, and tells all her friends next day what a polished man he is.

After dinner, the count drinks little wine, and sighs for a cigar before he rejoins the ladies. It is his mission to be stared at, and to look at himself in the glass. For the rest, he is a very worthy member of society, and has few vices.

When the entertainment is over, if he does not go to a ball or a drum, he betakes himself again to the club, and is soon surrounded by his ardent admirers in the smoking-room. When his cigar is over, he walks home, if the night is fine; if it rains, he calls a hansom cab; and so at last his day is done, when his valet undresses him and puts him to bed, and Count Pantouffles passes the night in dreaming of a land where every one wears hats, and there is never-ending bowing.

Very different from Count Pantouffles was Mr. Beeswing. If the count represented the outer man—the perfect gentleman in his hat and coat and boots—Mr. Beeswing was the very image of the inner man. The one was like the case of a clock, and the other like its works. It was not that Mr. Beeswing was wanting in politeness, or that he neglected his dress; but however well dressed he was, and however courteous he might be, you felt at once that he was not all manners—in other words, that there was something in him. It was often remarked that when Count Pantouffles sat down to dinner his occupation was gone. But it was then that Mr. Beeswing's reign began. While the count was simply eating and looking pretty, or uttering silly stuff to his neighbour, Mr. Beeswing was the light and life of the company.

“How I do like Beeswing!” said Lord Pennyroyal. “He always says what I was going to say, only he says it so much better.”

Now, all the world knows that Lord Pennyroyal never would have said anything like Mr. Beeswing's exquisite sayings. But that is not the point. It is that all that Mr. Beeswing said was so true and well timed, that he led people who never had an idea in their head to fancy, because he said something in



so natural and easy a way, that they could have said it just as well, only he was half a minute before them, and so took the words out of their mouth. As a matter of course, Mr. Beeswing and the count met often in society, for very good but very different reasons. Every one wished to see how pretty Count Pantouffles could look ; and every one wished to hear how witty and amusing Mr. Beeswing could be. They were good friends, though they really had not one conviction in common. How Mr. Beeswing spent the days before the 1st of June, 1870, is not recorded. But we may be pretty sure that he went out to dinner and "drums and balls" as usual ; that he said good things at the club and in the park ; and, in fact, was just as great a favourite during those few days as he had been any day for the last quarter of a century.

As for Edward Vernon and Harry Fortescue, they pursued that graceful idleness which so well became them. They only went once down to Pump Court, and then they only stayed a few minutes, because the weather was so fine. They looked in at the old chambers, and saw Grimditch, one of their sallow-faced fellow-pupils, deep in a great deed written on fifty skins, involving no end of landed estate, and as dusty as Regent Street in March.

“The very sight of it was enough to make a fellow sneeze,” Harry Fortescue said. So they both hastened away, and were soon seen sitting on chairs in Rotten Row between one and two. Then for an hour it was nothing but “How do you do, Harry?” “How do you do, Ned?” and they bowed and bowed to ladies who passed by, as constantly, but of course not so beautifully, as the count, who might be seen not very far off them doing the same thing. After that they went down to the club, and had luncheon; and then they went to the Botanic Gardens or to Hurlingham, and wondered if the blue rocks liked it. Then they came back in a hansom, and went out to dinner, sometimes together, sometimes separately. But they generally managed to meet in the course of the evening, and if they did not, they were sure to have a smoke together the last thing before they went to bed.

As for Colonel and Mrs. Barker, they remained as they were, still the same loving pair; and as for the Marjorams, it is not known how many times Mrs. Marjoram scolded her unhappy husband between the 23rd of May and the 1st of June, but we may be quite sure that Mr. Marjoram caught it for no good cause once every day in the week at least.





CHAPTER IX.

HOW THEY ALL WENT DOWN TO HIGH BEECH.

BUT now the morning of the 1st of June came, and the weather was as lovely as only June can be. The air was heavy with the lingering fragrance of May, and seringa, and mignonette; the gardens were bright with blush roses and scarlet geranium. If any one wonders at this, let him remember that the summer came in all of a rush in 1870, because the sun was so hot.

Lady Carlton had told all her visitors to be sure to come by the 3.30 train from Victoria, and she promised to send and fetch them from the station to High Beech. You are not to know the name of the station, so you must be content to be told that it was not an hour's distance from town.

We need scarcely say that Colonel Barker and his wife were the first to reach Victoria. The colonel had surprised the Ram Chowdah by being half an hour earlier in the assault than had been antici-

pated, and by taking time by the forelock he and the forlorn hope had escaped being blown to pieces. He had ever been a punctual man, but this event made him doubly aware of the importance of time. Some people would have fretted at having to wait, like Mrs. Barker, half an hour doing nothing at a railway-station; but then they were not as Mrs. Barker.

“Surely our time is our own, and we may spend it as we like,” she used to say; “and, besides, Colonel Barker hates being late.” Dear old thing! to please her husband she would have waited gladly five hours at any station in the world.

So they were the first. Next came Lady Sweetapple, driving up in her brougham, and behind her came her maid in a cab, with such a load of luggage!

“Call this a reasonable quantity of luggage!” said the cabman, who had only received three times his fare, and therefore was rather put out. “Why, that box is as big as three common boxes; and besides, there are three others, not to mention that long one covered with linen.”

“Never you mind whether it’s reasonable or not,” said Mrs. Crump, for that was the name of Lady Sweetapple’s maid. “You’ve got your fare and six-

pence each for the boxes, and I should like to know what more you want?"

With these words Mrs. Crump followed a porter and a whole truck of luggage into the station, and, having taken her mistress's ticket and her own, looked out for her in the waiting-room.

But Lady Sweetapple was not in the waiting-room. There was no one there but poor Mrs. Barker, sitting like Patience on a monument, while Colonel Barker had just gone out to buy a newspaper.

Where was Lady Sweetapple? On the platform, though it was at least a quarter of an hour before the train was to start, gazing up and down, and evidently expecting some one.

That some one soon arrived in the shape of Harry Fortescue, who came lazily walking along with Edward Vernon, to whom he left the charge of seeing their portmanteaus labelled while he talked with Lady Sweetapple.

"I thought you were never coming," said Lady Sweetapple; "that you would lose the train, and all sorts of dreadful things. But it is all right; and now let us secure a carriage."

As she said this she walked off with Harry, leaving Edward Vernon and her maid to follow. Close on their heels came Mr. Beeswing and Count Pan-

touffles, who had arrived together ; and so the end of all Lady Sweetapple's scheming for a carriage ended in Harry, Edward, Count Pantouffles, Mr. Beeswing, her ladyship, and Mrs. Crump all getting into one and the same carriage.

They all knew one another more or less well, and none of them knew Colonel Barker and his wife. That worthy pair shortly afterwards stalked along the platform, and got into the next compartment. During which operation Harry Fortescue had time enough to survey the colonel and to pronounce him a regular brick, while, as for Mrs. Barker's attire, he declared to Lady Sweetapple that it was "positively stunning."

"I never saw such a dress except in England," said Lady Sweetapple. "When will English ladies learn to study the harmony of colours in dress?"

It must be admitted that Mrs. Barker's attire was sufficiently alarming, and it might have been dangerous to walk with her in a field of oxen, or bulls, as young ladies will persist in calling them. But then it must be remembered that she dressed as she lived, to please her husband ; and if the colonel abhorred anything, it was dull, sad colours. In fact, he had lived so long with soldiers and their red coats, that his eyes were spoilt for anything less glaring.

And now the train is ready to start, and the whistle is given which sends it off, when a frantic pair are perceived tearing along the platform only just in time to be too late. Who were they? Of course they belonged to our party, and they are the Marjorams. Mrs. Marjoram made desperate efforts, and called shrilly, and telegraphed to the guard with her parasol, bidding her husband be a man and jump in. But it was all no use.

"Train five minutes late already, ma'am," said the inspector of traffic to whom she appealed; "and as for getting into a train while it is in motion, that is punished by a penalty of forty shillings by the bye-laws of the Company."

All then that remained for Mrs. Marjoram was to fall back on the unhappy Marjoram, and abuse him before all the porters for being late, though it was entirely her own fault, for she had waited ever so long for a new bonnet which her milliner, with the usual faithlessness of her class, had promised and never sent home. So far from Mr. Marjoram having been the cause of the delay, he had been ready twenty minutes or more with his gloves on his hands and his hat on his head, waiting for Mrs. Marjoram, who would not give the milliner up, and so lost the train.

As for the rest, they proceeded happily on their way. Lady Sweetapple looked at Harry Fortescue, and Harry returned her gaze. Mrs. Crump sat huddled up in a corner, looking most respectable. Any one would have given her a penny for her thoughts, she seemed so lost in them. Perhaps she was thinking of "my lady's" last new dress. Perhaps of the greengrocer round the corner, who had so often asked her to throw her lot and her savings into his business and become his wife.

The first attempt at conversation was when Count Pantouffles told Edward Vernon that the Chelsea Suspension Bridge was "very fine"—a remark which he shortly followed up by observing that the weather was finer than it had been yesterday.

"Yes, count," said Mr. Beeswing, "and I shouldn't wonder if to-morrow were finer than either, and the day after finer than all three."

"Dear me, Mr. Beeswing," said the count, "you are always so witty. No one can hold his own against you."

"Perhaps it depends on how much they have to hold, and whether it's worth holding," broke in Lady Sweetapple.

How much more of this very instructive conversation might have been heard it is impossible to say,

had not the count all at once put his hand up to his face and cried out, "Oh, my eye!"

"What's the matter with your eye?" asked Mr. Beeswing.

"Oh, it has got what you call a coal in it, which came in through the window."

The pain which the dandy really suffered made all sympathise with him; but none of their offers of assistance to get what he called the coal out of his eye did him any good, till Mrs. Crump awoke from her reverie and got the cinder out for him, by pulling the upper eyelid over the under one, and so forcing out the obnoxious atom.

This gave the count immediate relief, and he was profuse in his thanks.

Mr. Beeswing turned to Mrs. Crump and said, "That was what I call having one's wits in the right place. How did you learn that bit of surgery?"

"From an engine-driver as was a friend of mine down in the West, sir. He used to say he never knowed it to fail;" and having said so much, Mrs. Crump relapsed into her reveries.

But here we are at the station. Out they all get. Those five and Mrs. Crump out of one carriage, and Colonel and Mrs. Barker out of the next. Harry

Fortescue ought to have felt ashamed for having laughed at Mrs. Barker on the platform in town, but he did not.

"Any one waiting for us from High Beech?" asked the colonel, who always had his wits about him.

"Yes, sir," said the porter. "Two carriages, and a cart for the luggage."

When the colonel and his wife on one side, and Lady Sweetapple and her train on the other, found they were going to the same place, they all behaved for a few minutes in the true British way. They stared at one another like wild beasts caught in a trap. If they had not been restrained by the force of circumstances and by fear, they would have eaten one another up bodily; as it was, they only stared at one another.

While Mrs. Crump and the valets of those who had that appendage looked after the luggage, and while Colonel Barker, and Harry, and Edward looked after theirs, the colonel being in great trouble till he saw Mrs. Barker's big black box shot out on the platform, the rest of the party, that is to say Lady Sweetapple, Count Pantouffles, Mr. Beeswing, and Mrs. Barker, went to look for the carriages. It must be owned that Mrs. Barker went in great fear and trembling with all these strangers,

and her eyes were often turned in the direction of the luggage van, where the colonel was contending with heaps of strange boxes in the effort to recognise his own.

“How are we to go?” said Mr. Beeswing. “Here are two carriages, a break and a brougham. If it were wet weather we should have no choice. We should put your ladyship and this lady,” turning to Mrs. Barker with an inquiring air——

“My name is Barker,” said that lady.

“Exactly so,” went on Mr. Beeswing. “We should put Lady Sweetapple and Mrs. Barker into the brougham, and then we men could go nicely into the break.”

“Oh,” said Lady Sweetapple, who much dreaded a drive of three miles in a close carriage with any strange lady. “Oh, but as the weather is fine, I mean to go in the break. I hate to be boxed up in a close carriage.”

“With all my heart,” said Mr. Beeswing. “I shall only be too happy, as in any case I shall have to go in the break.”

Just at this moment up came Colonel Barker, and Harry, and Edward, while Mrs. Crump, surrounded by a band of valets and porters, loomed in the distance behind a mountain of luggage.

“How shall we go?” was what Colonel Barker heard as he came; and he caught up the words at once, as he was a man of few words and much action.

“How shall we go? Why, if the ladies choose to go in the shut carriage, of course they must have it. If not, and they don’t mind the sun and wind, they had better go in the break. Only let them say how they will go.”

“I am going in the break,” said Lady Sweetapple in a soft determined voice.

“And I should like to go in the brougham, dear,” said Mrs. Barker.

“Well, then,” said Colonel Barker, “if no one else wishes to go in the brougham, I will go in it with my wife, and we can take that lady’s maid on the box.”

“Yes, that will do very nicely,” said Lady Sweetapple, whose heart was set more and more on going in the break. Of course we all know, if she had done what she really liked, she would have driven over to High Beech, with Harry Fortescue, in the brougham; but we also all know that that would have been improper, and as there is to be nothing improper, or approaching to it, in this story, it can’t be allowed.

So it was all arranged to every one's pleasure, and the only objector to this exit from the station would have been the horse that drew the cart which carried the luggage, for it was piled up with boxes and portmanteaus like a little Alp; but then we all know horses and other beasts of burden can't speak; and very fortunate it is, or else we should hear many complaints and protestations from brute beasts on all roads and streets, both in town and country.

"What a great party!" said Mrs. Barker to her husband. "How glad I am not to go with that fine lady in the brougham, but to have you with me, dear. What do you think her name is?"

"How can I tell?" said Colonel Barker. "But I did hear some one call her Lady Sweetsop, or some such name. I wonder if that foreign-looking fellow with the black moustache is her husband? Looks rather like an Italian singer."

"Now, Jerry," said Mrs. Barker, "don't you leave me too long alone with any of those strange people. I never feel happy except when you are there to take care of me; and if it weren't to please you, you know I would never have come."

"Never fear," said the colonel, "I won't leave you. I only came because I thought it would do you good. But didn't we hear the Marjorams

were to be of the party? Where are they, I wonder?"

"What!" said Mrs. Barker; "do you mean to say you didn't see Mrs. Marjoram running along the platform and calling out to the guard to stop?"

"'Pon my life I didn't," said the colonel. "I suppose I was settling myself into my seat, or putting the tickets into my pocket, or something. No, I never saw Mrs. Marjoram."

"There she was, though," said Mrs. Barker; "and I am afraid poor Mr. Marjoram must have had a bad time of it. She looked more snappish than usual."

"No," said Colonel Barker to himself in a musing way, "no, I wouldn't change places with Marjoram, not if I were to be made commander-in-chief. I wonder why it is that Mrs. Marjoram leads him such a life?"

"Don't you know, dear?" said Mrs. Barker. "It's because she has taken it into her silly head to be jealous of him. And you know when a woman takes to jealousy, it is like sweet wine turned into vinegar—the more she loves him the more unkind she is to him."

"Don't you ever be jealous, then," said Colonel Barker. "I couldn't bear to see you become a vinegar-cruet."

“Never fear, dear,” said Mrs. Barker. “I know you too well not to feel sure that you will never give me any cause.”

And so the loving pair went on, as though they had just been married, and the gallant colonel were twenty-five and Mrs. Barker just out of her teens. Very silly to those who look on, you will say; but then you must remember there were no lookers-on, and as for silliness, all love-making looks silly to those who look on, at whatever age it is made; so none of you mind or waste your spite at what passed between Colonel and Mrs. Barker in Lady Carlton’s brougham. It was enough for them and for us to know that they were supremely happy, and that they would not have changed places with any couple in the country.

The party in the break were much more lively, but not nearly so happy, as that faithful pair. Lady Sweetapple kept her great eyes fixed on Harry Forescue, and Mr. Beeswing told Count Pantouffles that night at High Beech that he was afraid she would have eaten him up, body and bones, like the wolf in “Red Riding Hood.” Count Pantouffles smiled and showed his teeth much as usual, but he had no opportunity for bowing. Edward Vernon chatted away to Mr. Beeswing, though all the while he was thinking

of Alice Carlton. As for Harry Fortescue, he too rattled away, now answering Edward, now provoking Mr. Beeswing to say something good, now turning to Lady Sweetapple to hear if she were going to say anything; but she said scarcely a word, but looked and looked at him—they sat opposite to one another—as though she could never have her full of gazing at him.

At last Harry Fortescue began to feel as though he were magnetised, and could bear it no longer, and proposed to the count to change places with him. The wind was strong in their faces, and he pretended to think that it would be better for the count's eye that he should sit with his back to the wind, especially as the horses went at a good pace.

"Ah, my dear fellow, how kind of you!" said the count. "I shall change my place with the greatest pleasure." In all that concerned his looks the count was most sensitive, and he would no more have gone about with a swollen eye than he would have appeared in public without his hat. When that change was accomplished, and Harry Fortescue was out of eyeshot of the siren, he began to recover his absence of mind, and fell to thinking how Florence Carlton would look, and if she would be glad to see him.

What a pity it is, is it not, that we do not know

other people's thoughts, and that we are so often left to mere guesswork to discover what they think of us? If Harry Fortescue had known that all this time, while he was being gazed at and magnetised by Lady Sweetapple, Florry Carlton was dying with impatience to see him, and making her maid put some final touches to her hair intended for his especial favour, he might have defied the glances of the siren. As no man, it is said, can have more than one disease at a time, so we hold it to be impossible that a man can be in love, or even much taken, with two women at once. But you are none of you to infer from what we have said, that Harry Fortescue was in love either with Lady Sweetapple or with Florry Carlton. We know now, indeed, in spite of what she said at first, that Florry is almost in love with him, if not quite. Did not those tears prove it? For she was no crocodile; she was not old enough nor wicked enough to shed false tears. But Harry Fortescue had only a leaning towards Florry because she was such a good partner; and just as this leaning was passing into an inclination which might be developed into affection and love—just, in short, as he had been inoculated, or, if you prefer it, vaccinated, with the soft passion, and it was as yet uncertain whether it would take—he

became acquainted with Lady Sweetapple, whose views with respect to love and marriage were much more active and advanced.

It was not that Lady Sweetapple had no principle. She would have scouted such a notion. Her principles were perfect; it was only her practice that fell a little short of them. Pray do not exclaim, good reader! Do your principles never exceed your practice? Are you always so good and charitable as you ought to be? Do you never regard your principles in the light of a sleeping partner, who has no right to interfere with the management of the great concern of your life? Besides, you are many of you well and happily married; you have faithful husbands and virtuous wives, health, friends, children—everything that you can wish. Now, recollect that Lady Sweetapple was a young woman and a widow, that she had a feeling heart, as well as great attractions. How, then, can you wonder when she saw a very handsome man of twenty-six, not yet given away by the public voice to any one, that she felt it worth while to take an interest in him, and try to make a conquest of him? You may say she was too old for him; and so no doubt she was, or rather will be, if she marries him. But then you must recollect that a woman is

the last person in the world to come to such a conviction, or, if she feels it, she puts it away as a thing a long way off, like death or the day of judgment. What a young and beautiful woman two or three years older than a young man feels, is that now is her time. The present belongs to her. Now is the sunshine when she can make hay; and hay she accordingly makes, in more senses than one, with the affections of men much younger than herself. What matters it to her, or, for that matter, to them, that twenty years hence she will be fifteen years at least too old for him? It will be quite time enough to think of that time when it really arrives.

This, too, is quite apart from the consideration whether, supposing the woman to be the better horse, which she undoubtedly often is, a man is not happier when his wife is older than himself. Certainly there are many such happy marriages, and the fact that they sometimes at least occur is a proof, after all, that they cannot be so bad. As an exception, therefore, like the marriages of first cousins—whose children, be it remarked, are not, as is fallaciously asserted, always either knaves or fools—we may admit that a man may marry a woman older than himself, and yet be perfectly happy. This, no doubt, was what Lady Sweetapple felt sure of when

she was gazing at Harry Fortescue. She felt that she could marry such a very handsome and agreeable young man without any breach of principle, if he would only have the courage to ask her.

But would Harry Fortescue have the courage to ask her? That depends a great deal on his principle, on his affection for Florence Carlton, and on the force of circumstances. Perhaps, if you will only have the patience to read this story through, you may have some information on all these points.

But, to return to Lady Sweetapple. She was very much disappointed when she found Harry Fortescue wanted to change his place; but she really had no right to be so. She ought, on the contrary, to have felt that his restlessness was only a proof of her influence. But as women live much more in the present than men, she was disappointed, and thought, "Silly fellow! why can't he be content to sit opposite to me, without caring for the count's eye, which is, after all, quite well."

Then, on the principle of keeping her eyes in and for mere practice, she began to look at the count, or, to speak more correctly, Count Pantouffles began to ogle Lady Sweetapple. Strange to say, she did not feel the count's eyes in the least sympathetic or magnetic, and the result was that she failed to mag-

netise him ; and, now we think of it, as the count, as we have told you, was all outside, you might as well have tried to make an impression with your eyes on an overcoat as on Count Pantouffles. There he sat opposite to her, smiling and showing his teeth, and uttering little nothings as if he had been a human steam-engine, or an automaton worked by the wheels of the break. Finding it no use, she turned her eyes on Mr. Beeswing, and even on Edward Vernon ; but either she had lost her power, and Harry Fortescue had swallowed it all up, for they were as stones to her glances. The fact was that Mr. Beeswing was eye-proof, and, as for Edward Vernon, the nearer he got to High Beech, the more he felt what a very nice girl Alice Carlton was.

And now we must have another explanation. Were Edward Vernon and Alice Carlton really in love with one another ? In answer to this direct question, which admits of no fencing, we must say we think it rather brutal, thus early in the story, that we should be taken by the throat and forced to say whether this or that young lady or young gentleman are in love with one another. Why can't you wait and read for yourselves ? In love, as in farming, the maxim is certainly most true which bids you hurry no man's cattle, least of all the characters of a

novelist. As for Edward Vernon and Alice Carlton, you have all of you heard what they have already said on the subject. Nothing, in short, is more likely to disturb the story of true love, and to make it run anything but smooth, than to be always asking impertinent questions of a pair of incipient lovers. People who make such inquiries only show that they have no conception of a passion and of its beginnings. There lies the little germ in the human heart which may or may not come to something. Bright eyes and sunny glances must smile and shine on it. It must be tended, and watered, and even pruned before we can say this is a passion and they are in love. And nothing can be more indelicate than to anticipate the happy announcement, and perhaps cause its ruin, than by asking such a very rude question—were Alice Carlton and Edward Vernon really in love with one another? Dear reader, do show a little more knowledge of the human heart and the growth of true affection than to fancy that when young people have met half a dozen times, like one another as partners, long to see one another again, and even feel a little flutter at the prospect of meeting, that they are as good as engaged, the wedding-cake ordered from Walker's or from Chester, the day fixed, and even the bishop and assisting clergyman

selected who are to perform the ceremony. Well, you will ask, willing to justify yourselves, "But is there not such a thing as love at first sight?" Yes, there is; but we must say, if you ask so many silly questions, we shall not be at all likely to fall in love at first sight with you, gentle reader, whoever you may be. There is, or at least there was, love at first sight; but it is the exception to the rule, the miracle, the Phoenix, which only returns once in a century. It is the Aloe of Love, that sometimes bursts out all at once into bloom in that way, and puts all experience out of joint. Indeed, it is not at all sure that this kind of love is not extinct, quite died out, like the Dodo. In these days of constant intercourse between the sexes in all classes of life, few are so rash, either of men or women, as to rush into love at first sight. People prefer to take their headers off rocks, out of bathing-machines, or from mossy banks; but as the great pain and peril of matrimony is now universally understood, for the most part young men and women walk into love—first, just a little dash with the foot to see how the water feels, whether it is warm or cold; then half the leg; then up to the waist; then above the heart; and even then the step is quite serious enough, and the breath flies from the lungs quite fast enough, to

make walking into love, with the certainty of a dip into deep water at last, quite sufficiently exciting. So far, therefore, as we are at present advised, it is doubtful whether there will be any falling into love at first sight in this story. If, after this announcement, any romantic reader is dissatisfied, let him not read a line more of it, and then, we have no doubt, if he can prove that he knows nothing of the end of the story, any respectable circulating librarian will return him his subscription.





CHAPTER X.

HOW THEY ARRIVED AT HIGH BEECH.

BUT now we are approaching High Beech, and must look about us to see what the country is like. The road from the station was hilly—all ups and downs, like life, as Mr. Beeswing said. It was just the sort of road along which a rolling stone on one of those pitches might break a horse's knees, and turn in a second two hundred guineas into fifty pounds. It was poor soil, sandy and gravelly; and though it was mostly reclaimed for agricultural purposes, the heath that crept out everywhere along the banks only showed that a barren nature had been expelled by the plough and London manure, and was only waiting till the enterprising agriculturist who had sowed a tract of primeval heath with sovereigns should get tired of the attempt, and be followed by some one less sanguine than himself, to become a barren moor again. But at present there was no such sign. On the

contrary, everything showed that the sovereigns used for seed were forthcoming in abundance; and every one, while admitting the fruitlessness of the attempt to make such farming pay, must admit the prodigality with which Sir Thomas Carlton carried on a perpetual struggle with those unfruitful acres. But in reality this is just the way in which half the waste lands in Kent, Surrey, and Sussex, within a certain distance from London, have been reclaimed originally and are still kept in cultivation. They grow crops, and sometimes very fine ones, especially of roots; but what does it cost to cultivate them? Fortunate it is for agriculturists who bring down their sovereigns from Lombard Street, that they are not bound, like Mr. Alderman Mechi, to show their books and balance-sheets every year. After all, it is an innocent expense. It does not ruin them, and it provides labour and life to many poor people, who would otherwise come on the rates.

But our present purpose is not to discuss agriculture, but to admire the country in which High Beech was situated. No doubt long ago it had been all one heath, swelling up here and there into those charming hills and knolls which may yet be seen in Surrey and Berkshire, in the region of Bagshot Sand. In old time, the oases of loam and clay,

which are found at rare intervals in such soil, had been seized and cultivated as little farms and homesteads. But now all round the park at High Beech the plough had passed over the good and the barren soil alike, and the result, agriculturally speaking, was what we have described.

But inside the park gates the prospect was very different. It was of great extent, a chase rather than a park, with right of free warren, vert, and venison, and all the mediæval rights that ever existed. There was a tradition that the red king had stopped to hunt over his manor and forest of High Beech when on his way to his last fatal hunting with Sir Walter Tyrrel in the New Forest. King John had certainly hunted there, and so had Edward IV., for the oak of that merry monarch is still to be seen in High Beech Park. The great charm of the park was its varied nature. Here there were great swelling hill-sides, some purple with heather in July, others green with brackens in spring. There, hillocks golden with gorse where the sand gave way to loam ; and down in the hollows, and even on the hills, great oaks stood, deep-rooted in the clay which lay here and there in pockets. Nor had the Carltons in recent times neglected the chase. On the sand and gravel were planted

Deodars and Wellingtonias, and Araucarias and other Conifers among the Scotch firs, which seem to have grown there in clumps from everlasting. By the height and girth of the strangers, one could see that as soon as a new variety was established it had been planted in High Beech Park, and so, while every one else was wondering whether the *Nobilis*, or the *Insignis*, or the *Douglas* would thrive in English soil, it had already been years growing at High Beech, and the Carltons had the start of the country.

Such, in a few words, was the park to which the party in the break were now rapidly approaching. After undulating up and down rather more suddenly than usual, the carriage turned to the left, through iron gates, at the side of which stood a comfortable but not very picturesque lodge, out of the windows of which beamed the rosy face of a middle-aged woman, whose daughter ran out to open the gates.

Once through the gates, the carriage passed up the shoulder of a longer hill than usual, the brow of which was studded with gigantic Scotch firs. Then the road dived down into a hollow, through an array of old forest oaks. Across a brook at the bottom, it again climbed a hill, not quite so long as the last; and on reaching the top, the house at High Beech

was to be seen crowning another eminence, between which and the carriage was a gentle descent and a corresponding rise.

“The house at last!” said Lady Sweetapple, who had never been at High Beech before. “Mr. Fortescue, in what style of architecture is the house built?”

Now Harry Fortescue was not skilled in architecture. It was not often that he was asked anything that he could not answer, but on this occasion he had not a word to say. Perhaps he was still thinking of Lady Sweetapple’s eyes, and comparing them with those of Florry Carlton.

“I am sure I can’t tell,” he mumbled out at last. “Edward, why do you not answer Lady Sweetapple? You know much more of architecture than I can pretend to. All I know about it is, that it is an old and not a new house.”

Now most of you are of course aware that when a lady puts a question, it is not the same thing to her by any means if it is answered by the wrong person. What is the use of putting a question at all, if the person to whom it is addressed refuses to answer it? Can he be allowed to pass the question on to the next person, like a misdirected letter? By no means. So, at least, thought Lady Sweetapple,

who seemed to consider Edward Vernon by no means a sufficient substitute for Harry Fortescue.

“Oh, Mr. Fortescue, if you don’t choose to answer me, pray don’t pass me on to any one else. I only cared to know what the architecture was in your opinion.”

What Harry Fortescue might have answered—whether he would boldly have answered Renaissance, or Etruscan, or Doric; or whether Edward Vernon, like a good fellow, would have come to his rescue—must remain untold, for the best reason in the world—that we have no means of saying.

By this time the horses had trotted up the last hill, and were within the palings which parted the park from the pleasure-ground round the house. In a minute more they were crushing the gravel of the drive under their hoofs, and in less time than it takes to write the words, the break and its freight stood before the steps that led up to the hall.

“Here we are at last,” said Mr. Beeswing to Count Pantouffles, who was on the side nearest the steps. “Jump out and hand Lady Sweetapple down.”

Now what Lady Sweetapple would have liked best would have been that Harry Fortescue should have helped her out. But in this world we cannot always

have what we wish ; and so, as the count obeyed Mr. Beeswing's command like an automaton, she had to bow to the decrees of fate. As soon as Lady Sweetapple was safely landed, all the rest followed, and now we see the whole party, minus Colonel and Mrs. Barker and the unhappy Marjorams, passing up the steps. By this time Harry Fortescue, who had recovered his senses, had just beaten the footman in a race up to the bell, which he pulled with a will, which soon brought Mr. Podager, the butler, to the hall-door, who now marshalled all the visitors in the hall.

“ My lady is in the drawing-room,” said Mr. Podager with a husky voice, preparing to show the way thither.

There were not, fortunately, many cloaks and wraps to get rid of, though it was the month of June ; and so in a minute or two Lady Sweetapple and her satellites stood in the blue drawing-room. There they found Lady Carlton and her daughters, and a general welcome, and not a little bowing and scraping on the part of the count, followed.

After Lady Carlton had asked particularly after “ dear ” Lady Sweetapple and the state of her health, and had duly thanked Count Pantouffles for sparing so much of his valuable time as to run down to High

Beech, she reflected for a moment, and then asked, "But where are the Marjorams, and where are Colonel and Mrs. Barker? Did they not come in the same train?"

"If you mean a dear old couple, the husband a military-looking man," said Mr. Beeswing, "they are coming, and can't be very far behind. We left them the brougham to themselves. But as for the Marjorams, we know nothing about them."

"Oh yes, we do," said the unearnest Harry Fortescue. "I am sure the Marjorams were the unhappy pair that were late for the train. The wife was a severe-looking woman, with an aquiline nose and very thin lips, and the husband, though he might be a very presentable person if you saw him alone, was at that moment so crushed by his wife, that you might almost have put him into Lady Sweetapple's handbag."

"I am so glad the Barkers will be here soon. But how stupid of the Marjorams to lose the train!"

Then ringing the bell to recall the tardy Podager, "Podager," she said, when that worthy appeared, puffing and snorting, "when the brougham comes with Colonel and Mrs. Barker, it must go back to the station to wait for Mr. and Mrs. Marjoram, who are sure to come by the next train." Then she

added, "If they are lucky, they will just be here by half-past seven, in time to dress for dinner."

By this time Lady Sweetapple had kissed each of the young ladies on the cheek with an appearance of the greatest cordiality, and they were just vanishing with her to show her her room.

"You know where to go, dears," said Lady Carlton. "Lady Sweetapple is to be in the Butterfly-room, and her maid close by, in the chintz dressing-room."

"Oh yes, mamma, we know all about it. Palmer settled it and told us all about it this morning," and then the two ran off up-stairs with Lady Sweetapple, and the rest were left behind with Lady Carlton.

"I hope you like the country, Count Pantouffles," said Lady Carlton, more for the sake of saying something suited to his comprehension than for any other reason.

"Oh yes," said the count, "I do like the country when it is not too far from town. Then I don't like it at all."

"In fact," said Mr. Beeswing, "the count is so fond of London that he would like to spread it all over the country. By that means we Londoners should have more fresh air, and yet never grow so rusty as dwellers in the country often become."

"Very true, my dear Beeswing," said the count. "Just what I wanted to say, only I could not say it."

At this moment, greatly to Lady Carlton's relief, Sir Thomas came in from his farm by the garden-door, and the wheels of the brougham were heard crushing over the gravel with Colonel and Mrs. Barker.

After welcoming the guests who had already arrived, Sir Thomas said—

"I really must go and receive Mrs. Barker in person. She is a perfect model wife, and I only hope both your wives"—turning to Harry and Edward—"will be equally affectionate when they are her age. I say nothing of you, Beeswing, because I look upon you as incorrigible. In fact, I begin to fear you will never marry; but, if ever you do marry, be sure you take to yourself as perfect a woman as Mrs. Barker."

"Perhaps I would," said Mr. Beeswing, "only I am afraid I might fall into the clutches of a Mrs. Marjoram."

"Hush, hush! no scandal," said Sir Thomas, as he vanished through the door to meet Mrs. Barker.

In a moment or so he reappeared, leading in that lady, who was closely followed by the colonel.

“Dear Mrs. Barker,” said Lady Carlton, “how are you? I hope you have had a pleasant journey down, and that you did not feel dull in the brougham.”

“Pleasant?” said Mrs. Barker; “of course it was pleasant down. Colonel Barker and I had no one in the carriage with us in the train, and all the way from the station we were alone in the brougham. I really think we were as happy as we could be—were we not, Colonel Barker?”

“My dear,” said the devoted Barker, “I should think every one knew by this time that you and I are never happier than when we are alone together.”

“How would you like,” said Harry Fortescue, “to live twenty years with Mrs. Barker in a desert island all alone?”

“I should like it above all things,” said Mrs. Barker, taking the words out of her husband’s mouth; “and, what is more, I am quite sure Colonel Barker would like it just as much as myself.”

“Then you ought to claim the Dunmow flitch,” said the incorrigible Harry, returning to the charge, in spite of the look of the colonel, who grew red about the gills when he felt himself chaffed. But here the genial Beeswing came to the rescue.

“ I can tell you why the colonel has not claimed the flitch, Harry. He is leaving it for you, and, from what I hear and see, I am not so sure that you may not be in a condition to claim it before long. But then, you know, it is not enough to be married to be able to claim the flitch ; you must have lived for a year and a day with your wife without ever once losing your temper. Now, do you think, when the time comes, you will be able to stand the test ? ”

“ What is all this ? ” said Lady Carlton. “ Are you really going to be married, Mr. Fortescue ? Or is it all a joke, Mr. Beeswing ? ” Then, as Harry would not answer, “ Do tell me, Mr. Beeswing. You know I take so much interest in Harry.”

“ How can I tell,” said Mr. Beeswing, “ when he refuses to answer himself ? All I can say is I hear him given away every day to this girl or that, and so I suppose he will some day marry some of them. But I spoke on no better authority than that, by common consent of all the town, Harry Fortescue will soon marry some one.”

“ Oh, if you have no better authority than all the world,” said Lady Carlton, “ my mind is quite easy ; but I own I should not like to hear that Mr. Fortescue was going to be married seriously from any one else than himself.”

This Lady Carlton said in a half earnest way, which was not without its effect on Harry. Then, changing the subject, she said—

“Sir Thomas, will you let Podager show these gentlemen their rooms? After that we will have some tea, and pray that the Marjorams may come in time for dinner.”

“Amen,” said Mr. Beeswing; “and after that prayer I hope we shall not think it necessary to wait for them.”

So Lady Carlton carried off Mrs. Barker to show her her room, Podager showed the gentlemen theirs, and then Harry Fortescue proposed to Edward Vernon to go out on the terrace and have a weed.

“May I not come too?” said Count Pantouffles.

“We will all go,” said Colonel Barker—“at least, all that smoke;” and in two minutes the four were puffing away on the terrace.

This move left Sir Thomas and Mr. Beeswing alone together, for they belonged to the generation which does not smoke.

“Any news in town?” asked Sir Thomas. “I have been doing nothing down here these last few days, and there might be a revolution, for all that I know of it.”

“Nothing at all. They tell us we are in a period

of profound peace, and that the political horizon has not been so clear for years as it now is."

"I hope it may last, with all my heart," said Sir Thomas. "So the ill-feeling and heart-burnings between France and Prussia have quite died out?"

"Quite," said Mr. Beeswing; "at least, that's what all the old fogies say at the clubs, and you know they are always right—at least, in their own conceit."

"I wonder which would win," said Sir Thomas, "if it *really* came to a fight?"

"There again, according to the same venerable authorities, some of whom are even to be found at the Horse Guards, there can be no manner of doubt. Old General Blazer, who was deputy quarter-master-general in the Peninsula, and whose last public service was to recommend Lord Raglan in the Crimea not to march into Sebastopol after the battle of the Alma—he declares that the French would thrash the Prussians into cocked hats, whatever that may be; and he offered to stake his professional reputation that the Emperor Napoleon would be at Berlin in three weeks after the declaration of war."

"How fortunate it is," said Sir Thomas, "that this is all matter of mere speculation, as the political horizon is so clear. A war between France and

Prussia might be very inconvenient for England, and it couldn't last long without our being drawn into it."

"Well, you know," said the philosophic Beeswing, "there must be wars sometimes, if it were only to keep down the surplus population of countries that have no emigration. They are a necessary evil; and, besides, if there were no wars, we should never know the true blessings of peace."

"Those are questions," said Sir Thomas, "which I scarcely care to go into. We people in business are content to take all the peace we can get, and the history of the world shows that, in the long run, we are not likely to be blessed with too much of it."

While the smokers were smoking, saying very little, and Sir Thomas and Mr. Beeswing had so satisfactorily settled the peace of Europe after the fashion of the old fogies, Florence and Alice Carlton had long since left Lady Sweetapple alone in the Butterfly-room, and had betaken themselves to their dear old schoolroom.

As soon as the door was shut, Florry asked Alice—

"How do you think she looks?"

"I think, dear, he looks very well indeed."

“He!” cried out Florry. “I said ‘she,’ and you answer ‘he.’ Which ‘he’ are you thinking of?”

“Oh,” said Alice, with a blush, “you know, Florry, I was thinking of Harry Fortescue. Don’t you think he looked very well?”

“Of course I do,” said Florry; “he always looks well when he doesn’t wear himself down dancing all night at balls to which we are not invited. But I said ‘she,’ dear; and you know I did not mean Mrs. Barker.”

“Oh,” said Alice with another blush and a smile of satisfaction in having deceived her sister, for to tell the truth it was not Harry Fortescue that she had been thinking of, but Edward Vernon, and her head and heart were so full of him that she could think of no one else just at that minute.

“Oh,” said Alice, “that is quite another question. But I must say I think she looks remarkably well. A little older of course than she did a year ago, and perhaps not quite so fresh; but you know last season she was in mourning, and that tones and fines people down wonderfully.”

“Did you think she looked a good deal—I should call it staring—at Harry? It seemed to me she never took her eyes off him, even in those few minutes.”

“ Well, dear, to tell the truth, I did not see whether she stared at Harry or not. I was looking another way.”

After this there was a little pause, and Alice, in her passive way, relapsed into her bad habit of thinking of Edward Vernon. In a little while Florry returned to the attack. She was a girl who thought out loud, if it is allowable to use the phrase. It gave her no happiness to look inwards.

“ Alice, dear.”

“ Well, dear, I’m listening.”

“ What is the use of widows? Why are they allowed to exist?”

“ I’m sure I can’t tell. I suppose, though, they must exist, like everything else.”

“ I don’t agree with you at all,” said Florry. “ They ought always to die with their husbands, or not be permitted to marry again, as is the custom among the Jews, I am told, or be shut up in a college and never allowed to show their faces in society.”

“ Why not burn them at once, as they used to do in India?” asked Alice.

“ Why not indeed?” said Florry, waxing warm at the thought. “ Of course there ought to be suttees in Europe as well as in India. There, no right-minded woman ever survives her husband, and so it

ought to be here. As it is, they marry, and then their husbands die, or they kill them, which comes to much the same thing, and then having had their chance—the one chance which properly belongs to them—they come with all their cunning and deceitfulness into society and carry off the young men that girls ought to have. I think it very unfair, and it ought to be stopped by Parliament. The first of women's rights should be, 'No widow has any right to marry again.'"

"How very unkind to widows!" said Alice; "and all because——"

Before she could finish her sentence Florry had finished it for her.

"Yes, all because of this odious Lady Sweetapple. You are quite right. She it is that has opened my eyes to the wickedness of widows."

As she said this Florry Carlton opened her eyes so wide that if Lady Sweetapple had been near they must have eaten her up.

"Well, dear, don't get into such a way, or you'll be crying again as you were the other day, and Palmer will be asking questions again, and putting two and two together in her wise head. How do you know that Lady Sweetapple is such a wicked widow as you describe her?"

"Just like you!" said Florry. "You never see anything till you are told it."

"But what was there to see?" asked Alice, who for the very good reason given above had not even seen the little that there had been to see.

"Did I not see her staring at Harry and devouring him—yes, literally devouring him with her eyes—and don't I know what that means? Besides, she is always dancing with him, and that I won't forgive. Mary Challoner wrote me all about their doings at Lady Pennyroyal's ball last week, and in a postscript Mary added that a friend of hers had seen them last Wednesday, side by side, in the stalls seeing *M.P.*"

"Mary Challoner is a great gossip. One never can believe half of what she says she has seen herself, and as for what her friends see and tell her, she must have at least a thousand friends, and they must each tell one dreadful story at least every day. As for Lady Pennyroyal's ball, so long as the strict laws which you purpose to pass with regard to widows are not in force, I suppose we must let widows dance with young men, always provided the young men like it."

"That's just what I complain of, and what is really so dangerous," said Florry. "I have told

you ever so often, and tried to din it into your silly little head, we—you and I, I mean, and all girls—don't meet widows on equal terms. It's something like one of Colonel Barker's stories about old soldiers and raw recruits. We are like raw recruits, we are ready enough to do what is right and proper, only we don't know how, and just as some nice young man, quite unexceptional in every respect, is beginning to like us, and we are thinking whether we shall ever like him, down comes this widow, or any widow—for I don't like to be personal, it's so vulgar—and swoops off with our nice young man before our very eyes, and we are helpless. That's what I am afraid may happen to Harry Fortescue, and I don't like it. How would you like it with Edward Vernon?"

"Oh, Florry!" said Alice. "I declare I never thought of such a thing. What is it to me if any one snaps up Edward Vernon?"

"I don't believe you, dear," said Florry. "I'm not such a fool as I look, and I believe if there were the least danger of Lady Sweetapple's carrying Edward away from you, you would be in a worse state of mind than I am."

"I know he dances with her sometimes, for he has told me so," said Alice.

"I daresay; but she doesn't look at him in that way. If she did, you would be the first to cry out."

"Well, well, dear, we shall see if your fears are real. Very lucky that you have not had a good fit of crying, for there is the gong for tea and we must go down. If your eyes had been red, every one, including Lady Sweetapple, must have looked at you, and then she might have guessed that there might be something between you and Harry."

"Now mind, you goose," said Florry—"you utterly inexperienced, soft-hearted thing, I never said there was anything between me and Harry. All I said was, that it was very hard that widows should rush in and carry off nice young men who might otherwise have been legitimate objects of affection to young ladies. Such conduct is enough, as papa says of the Red Republicans, to sap all the foundations of society, and to reduce the world to a state of political ruin."

"Never fear, darling; I will not mistake your feelings or your intentions; but for all that, I don't think you would be so severe on Lady Sweetapple if you did not care just one little bit for Harry Fortescue."

"And now let us go down," said Florry, "we have been up here quite long enough."



CHAPTER XI.

FIVE O'CLOCK TEA AT HIGH BEECH.

HEN the young ladies went down, they found the whole party, except the missing Marjorams, assembled round a five o'clock tea-table, though it was nearer six. Lady Sweetapple was talking in an animated way to Sir Thomas on the beauties of High Beech, and expatiating on the lovely view to be seen from the Butterfly-room. Mr. Beeswing was relating some London gossip to Lady Carlton, with which we will not trouble our readers. Harry Fortescue and Edward Vernon were listening to one of Colonel Barker's long stories; for he had already before tea-time, on the terrace, led the forlorn hope against the invincible Ram Chowdah, and had not half sacked his hill fort when they were summoned in to tea. Mrs. Barker sat bolt upright at the table, enjoying her tea much more than the rest; for she was one of those good and even-minded people who can drink tea at all

hours with impunity. And here let us remark that it is only very good people who can drink tea for a continuance in the afternoon or at night. We have the greatest respect for the Temperance movement, as is well known, but we say boldly that no one with a bad conscience can drink tea at night. Even those with good consciences know what it is to toss all night through because they have had a cup of green tea invidiously given to them; but add a bad conscience and an uneasy mind to a cup of green tea, or to express it more neatly, only pour a cup of green tea on an aching heart, and you shall have such a succession of nightmares and little apoplexies all through the night as will make you pray most devoutly for the morning. No, it is only persons of very serene and happy dispositions who can, at any rate in after-life, drink tea except at breakfast. And so far do we carry this conviction, that we never ask if So-and-so is happy with his family, or his family with him, but simply, "Do they drink tea regularly every night?" and if the answer is "Yes," we need ask nothing more, for nothing more is needed to prove that they must be a most happy and united family. So that you see there may be morality in a tea-pot after all.

Yes, there Mrs. Barker sat, so sleek and smooth.

in her black silk, and her hair—her own hair—so nicely braided over her brow, all wrinkled though it was, looking straight at Colonel Barker, and devouring him just as much as, according to Florry Carlton, widows were wont to devour young men by their eyes. No doubt what was passing in her mind was that there never was such an onslaught since the siege of Troy as that escalade of the Ram Chowdah's hill fort, nor any such warrior, Achilles himself not excepted, as Colonel Barker. In this faith she was profoundly happy, because it admitted to her mind no manner of doubt Colonel Barker was her ideal. He filled up the measure of her imagination and ran over, and there was no room in it for any other idol. Happy Colonel Barker, and still more happy Mrs. Barker!

Perhaps some of you may think it ridiculous that a woman past fifty should adore—yes, adore, that is the word—a man over sixty. That only shows what silly young folk some of you are at least. Do you not see that it is enough for the human heart that if a thing should have been once loved, to love it for ever? With perfect affection like that which existed between Colonel and Mrs. Barker there was no room for any change. They had loved one another young, and they loved one another now;

and time, if it brought any alteration, merely increased their affection, for it made them rely more and more on each other for moral support.

“They may chaff me,” said Colonel Barker to himself when young men mocked at him, as rude young men sometimes would do for his stories, and even for that sacred one of the Ram Chowdah—“they may chaff me, but Mrs. Barker likes to hear them. That’s quite enough for me.”

“There are no stories like Colonel Barker’s, my dear,” Mrs. Barker used to say to her gossips over cup after cup of that tea which it was her pride and privilege to be able to drink. “No, really none; so full of point and fire, and quite different from the silly stories in which the rising generation delight.”

It mattered not that Colonel Barker was rather short, fat, and pursy; that it was some time since he had seen his knees; that his head was bald, his nose red, and his features generally rubicund; that is to say, it mattered not in the least to Mrs. Barker, for she remembered the days when he was as slim and neat an officer as any in the service. Nor did it matter in the least to Colonel Barker that Mrs. Barker’s face was wrinkled, that her figure was very bad, that her hands were red,

and her neck withered ; for he had still in his eye the day when the daughter of the Commandant of Benares was the prettiest girl in the station, and that was quite enough for him. In fact, they loved one another, both for what they were and what they had been. Their affection was rooted in the past, and still flourished in the present ; and they could no more have helped loving one another than they could have borne to be parted from one another for a single day. For such good people, let us pray that death, when he ever visits Colonel Barker's house, may call for both husband and wife at the same hour ; for, as to what Colonel Barker would do without **Mrs.** Barker, or, still more, how **Mrs.** Barker could exist without her colonel, it is quite impossible to conceive.

“Colonel Barker, won’t you have some tea ?” said **Mrs.** Barker.

In company, you must know, she always called him “Colonel Barker.” It sounded better, she thought, and gave him his rank. But when they were alone she called him “Jerry,” as all his old friends called him ; just as some very popular men are called “Tim,” though their name is not Timothy any more than Colonel Barker’s was Jeremiah.

“Yes, my dear, in a moment ; we have just got

to the breach," said Colonel Barker; and again he plunged into the endless history of the Ram Chowdah.

"At this moment," he said, "the appearance of the breach was truly awful. It was swept by the fire of forty howitzers from the Ranee Tope, and, as we mounted to the assault, we could see the grape-shot scattering the shattered stonework like gravel."

"What a terrible moment!" said Edward Vernon.

"I believe you," said Colonel Barker; "but the worst was yet to come. The front file of the grenadiers of the —th Regiment Fire-eaters were swept away like chaff, some killed outright, and others rolling down, winged and wounded, into the dry ditch. The second followed; and just then there was a lull in the fire, for the niggers were reloading their howitzers. They had hardly got half way up when a new enemy appeared on the field."

"The Ram Chowdah himself, I suppose," said Harry.

"By no means," said Colonel Barker. "The Ram Chowdah was in the citadel, preparing to receive us after we had carried the breach. A new enemy appeared, but not in human shape."

“The devil!” said Harry; but only using the word as an expletive, and not suggesting that the new enemy was the foul fiend, though Colonel Barker supposed that to be Harry’s meaning.

“No, sir; not at all. Not the devil, but almost as bad. A band of thirty tigers!”

“The Royal Tigers, I presume?” said Edward; “the regiment called by that name?”

“Young man,” said Colonel Barker—and when he called a man “young” it was as much as to say “you fool,” only Colonel Barker was far too polite and knew the regulations of war far too well to call any man, young or old, a fool—“Young man, the Royal Tigers are a regiment in her Majesty’s service. How, then, could they have been found on the side of the Ram Chowdah?”

“Oh,” said Edward, “you didn’t finish your sentence, and I concluded that the Royal Tigers were coming up to support your attack.”

“Not at all,” said Colonel Barker, rather indignantly; “they were real tigers.”

“Real tigers!” exclaimed both Harry and Edward in one breath; for these real tigers beat all the sensational dramas to nothing, in which real fire, real water, real policemen, real thieves, and real donkeys are introduced one after another on the stage.

“Yes; real tigers, all alive and roaring.”

“But how did they come there, and what did they do? For you have only got as far as tigers.”

“Only wait,” said Colonel Barker, “and you shall hear. The Ram Chowdah, like Tippoo Sahib, was a great lover of tigers. All Orientals are, or used to be. They came in handy for devouring political prisoners and erring wives.”

“Do they ever eat widows?” asked Florry, who was now listening to the conversation.

“Widows! Bless your pretty face,” said the gallant colonel, “there are no such things in India; or, at least, were not in my time. They were all burnt to death.”

“Just as I thought,” said Florry to herself. “Why cannot we have the same good law here?”

“Well,” said the colonel, continuing his story, “when the Ram Chowdah heard that the breach was practicable, he ordered the dens of the tigers to be moved close to the counterscarp.”

“What’s a counterscarp?” asked Harry mechanically.

“Something to keep off the enemy,” said Edward.

And the colonel went on—

“Yes, close to the counterscarp. When the

column mounted to the assault, and the front file, as you have heard, were swept away by the grape-shot, he ordered his Kitmaghar Aga to run down and open the doors of the tigers' dens, that they might rush down on our men as they came up the breach. Strange to say, the Kitmaghar Aga refused, and was broken on the spot, or thrown to the tigers, or something, and another nigger was got to do his work. Well, to make a long story short, the den was unbolted, and all the tigers rushed down the breach, as I have said, to make a diversion, while our men were swarming up, and the Ram Chowdah's gunners were reloading the howitzers."

"And how did your men behave?" asked Edward.

"Splendidly! They charged the tigers, took them in flank, shot them down, bayoneted them, and, before you could say Jack Robinson, and before the howitzers were reloaded, there was not a tiger left alive on the breach."

"Wonderful!" said Harry. "But what became of the Ram Chowdah?"

"Well, after his fort was taken he retired into a sort of citadel with his wives and children, and barricaded the gate, and before we could get up a powder-bag to blow it open, he put a match into the

powder-magazine and was blown to atoms with his whole family."

"He left no widows then?" said Florry.

"Haven't I told you," said Colonel Barker, "there are no such things as widows in India? In my time you couldn't have found a widow—no, not if you had paid a thousand pounds for her."

"What a good thing!" said Florry.

By this time even Mrs. Barker thought they had heard enough of the Ram Chowdah, so that faithful woman dragged the colonel off to have some tea, and for a while stopped his mouth with a muffin.

Six o'clock was now long passed; seven o'clock came, and still no Marjorams.

"They'll be here by the last train," said Sir Thomas. "Marjoram wrote he was sure to come."

At a quarter-past seven the dressing-gong sounded, and Lady Sweetapple made a move to see how Mrs. Crump had progressed with her dress for dinner.

Now it was nearly half-past seven when the wheels of the brougham were again heard crushing the gravel, and in two minutes in stalked Mrs. Marjoram, followed by her husband, who had the aspect of a criminal who had committed a capital offence at the very least.

“Lady Carlton,” said that awful woman, “we owe you an apology, at least Mr. Marjoram”—and as she used the word Marjoram it sounded much more like “verjuice” or “stinging-nettle”—“at least Mr. Marjoram owes you one. It is all owing to him that we were late for the train, which started from the platform just as we came up.”

“Pray do not distress yourself, dear Mrs. Marjoram,” said Lady Carlton. “These mistakes will happen. I daresay it was not Mr. Marjoram’s fault after all.”

“No, indeed it was not—” began Mr. Marjoram ; but, before he could get any farther, he was stopped by his wife, who said that really, if he went on so contradicting her, she should be obliged to leave the room.

“Yes,” said Sir Thomas, “that is by far the best course. Let us all leave the room and dress, and eat our dinner in peace. I daresay it was nobody’s fault that you were late.”

“Nay,” said Mrs. Marjoram, “I really must protest it was all Mr. Marjoram’s fault; and so I will maintain to my dying day.”

But by this time the whole party had had more than enough of her protests, and they all streamed out of the room into the hall, whither Mr. and

Mrs. Marjoram had to follow them, and climb the slippery staircase that led to their room.

“I wonder,” said Mr. Beeswing to Count Pantouffles, “why such women were ever created. I’ll bet any money it was not in the least Mr. Marjoram’s fault.”

“Of course not—of course not,” said the count, even his intellect going as far as that. “I do wonder rather why such women are ever married.”

“That shows you to be very young, as I always thought you, my dear count. They are not like that when they are married; they become so. And these changes are some of those perplexing things which have always made me resolve, amongst many other good reasons, to remain a bachelor. But there is still another thing I want to know.”

“What?” said the count.

“Why it is not possible to ask such a good fellow as Marjoram to come and stay with you without his wife?”

This was a question quite beyond Count Pantouffles’ capacity; but Harry Fortescue, who came behind, answered it at once.

“I’ll tell you why it is. One only asks Mrs. Marjoram to save poor Mr. Marjoram’s life; for if she were left out in an invitation she would lead

him such a cat-and-dog life when he came back, that it would be the last of Mr. Marjoram. You would never hear of him again."

"Very like, Harry," said Mr. Beeswing. "I never thought of that. A very good idea!"





CHAPTER XII.

THE FIRST DINNER AT HIGH BEECH.

OH, Florry," said Alice, when the sisters got up-stairs, "how could you go on so about the tigers and the widows in India? I'm sure Lady Sweetapple heard every word, though she did seem so wrapped up with papa and Mr. Beeswing."

"Nasty thing!" said Florry, "I hope she did!" and as she said this she threw herself into an easy-chair, and covered her face with her hands.

"Well, now, what fresh harm has she done, dear? I am sure Harry Fortescue never once looked at her. He was too much taken up with Colonel Barker's story, just as Edward was, and yet you see I am not in the least angry."

"If she had not been there," said Florry sobbing, "I am quite sure Harry would have looked at me. But how can a bashful young man look at any one when, as soon as ever he turns round his

head, he is stared out of countenance by a widow like that? That's why I'm angry."

The fact was that Florry Carlton was rather hurt that Harry had not paid her more attention, and she put it all down to the bad influence of Lady Sweetapple; who, as you will see, will have in this story to answer for many sins besides those which she actually committed. It is not sure, had Lady Sweetapple been in the hall and Harry Fortescue on the terrace out of doors, that Florry Carlton would not have accused them both, or rather her, of bad faith, though it was quite impossible that, so situated, they could have set eyes on one another.

By this time the faithful Palmer had made her appearance.

"Miss Florry! Miss Florry! still sitting in that chair, and not an inch on in your dressing, and that too with the house full of company, and when you know dinner is served to the minute!"

"I don't care," said Florry. "Don't mind. There's Alice, who wants her hair done. Don't think of me."

"But I must think of you," said Palmer. "Here's Miss Alice all but ready, and you sitting idle, dawdling there. Dear, dear! what work I have with you, my dear!"

At last, after a deal of pressing and pitchforking

her things on her, as Palmer said, Miss Florry was dressed for dinner, and very handsome she looked all in white.

“Just like a bride without the orange flowers,” said Palmer.

“Orange flowers are out of fashion, like cards,” said Florry. “Whenever I’m married you sha’n’t make me a fright, Palmer. No, nor mamma either. I’ll have my way.”

“That you will, Miss Florry, I’ll be bound,” said Palmer. “How I do wish you’d take a leaf out of your sister’s book!”

“What book’s that?” said Florry.

“The book of patience, and forbearance, and gentleness,” said Palmer.

“That’s the whole duty of man,” said Florry, with a wicked laugh, “and of men who are married; but it is not the whole duty of girls, as any man will find who marries me.”

“Well, well, we shall see, lassie,” said Palmer. “‘Tis not the loudest talkers that are the best doers, and so it may be in your case.”

“There’s the gong!” said Alice, eager to cut this conversation short, as she knew how excited Florry was. “Let’s run down, Florry, and get to the dining-room before the rest.”

But on the stairs, or rather in the passage, coming out of the Butterfly-room, whom should they meet but Lady Sweetapple, who was hastening down after having had a most successful interview with Mrs. Crump.

“Dear me, Miss Carlton,” the siren said to Florry, “how charming you look all in white!”

“Yes,” said Alice, “Florry looks very well in white—it suits her complexion and figure; and so I must say do you, Lady Sweetapple. Why, you look almost like a bride!”

“Only I hope a good deal happier,” said the siren. “The dullest thing I know of is being a bride,” and then she sighed a sigh that seemed to come from the very bottom of her heart.

“Wicked story-teller!” said Florry to herself. “She would be glad enough to be married again to-morrow.”

But only observe for an instant how unjust she was. Amicia Lady Sweetapple did not say that she would not like to be married to-morrow. Very likely; but that, so far as her experience went, she thought it dull to be a bride. She had, in fact, done something once and disliked it. It did not at all follow that she might not do it over again and like it better.

By this time the three were down in the hall, and there they found that the greater part of the party were already assembled, having run down by the other staircase while they had stopped to pay compliments to one another and to sigh on the stairs.

Yes, there was Lady Carlton, beautifully dressed, and reminding Mr. Beeswing, as he gallantly informed her, of the day when there was no one in the London season to be compared to young Lady Carlton. There was Mrs. Barker, richly attired in a brocaded silk, the gift of her constant colonel, and wearing round her neck that famous emerald which he had won from the Ram Chowdah. There was Mrs. Marjoram, severe and stern, in a high sad-coloured dress, that looked like morning attire, and with a bunch of scarlet geraniums in a wreath round her head. As for the men, Harry Fortescue and Edward Vernon were dressed like English gentlemen. There was nothing loud or "stunning" about them. But the honours of rich attire were reserved, of course, for Count Pantouffles, who stood there, turned out by his valet, as if he came out of a bandbox, with the Grand Cross of St. Lazarus and St. Abraham on his coat, and the broad ribbon round his neck. He was the very ideal of a tailor's man, and a more perfect outside it was impossible to behold.

“Dinner is served,” said Mr. Podager. And then the procession of the loaves and fishes began out of the drawing-room and across the hall to the dining-room.

Sir Thomas Carlton took Lady Sweetapple ; Count Pantouffles Lady Carlton ; Mr. Beeswing took Mrs. Barker, lucky fellow ! Colonel Barker, unlucky fellow ! led in the forlorn hope in the person of Mrs. Marjoram ; and though last, not least in luck, Harry Fortescue took Florry ; and Edward Vernon, Alice Carlton ; Mr. Marjoram took in Miss Markham, who was the only stranger. How many does that make ? Fourteen in all, for the rest of the “neighbours” were not to come till the next day, when the party had shaken itself a little into shape. There was only one thing to mar the happiness of Florry. It so happened that Harry Fortescue sat between her and Lady Sweetapple.

“What a bore !” she thought ; “but perhaps it is better than if he sat opposite to her, and she stared him out of countenance.”

On the whole, it was a very merry dinner, and if any one felt hurt no one showed it. Even Mr. Marjoram, whom good luck had placed as far as possible from his tormenting half, ate and drank as if he was experiencing a new pleasure.

“It does one’s heart good to look at Marjoram,” said Mr. Beeswing to Lady Carlton. “He doesn’t look like the same man we saw arrive just before dinner.”

“That I call change of air,” said Lady Carlton. “Nothing does a man so much good, who is moped at home, as to go into the country and get rid of his cares.”

“Ah!” said Mr. Beeswing, “but there is a saying that man carries his cares with him wherever he goes. Are you quite sure Marjoram has left his behind him in London?”

“Don’t be spiteful,” said Lady Carlton. “I believe she is a very good wife.”

“She! who?”

“Oh, you know very well.”

“Ah, I see now,” said Mr. Beeswing; “but that is just what women, who are very good wives, say of others who are very bad ones. The good are always ready to make excuses for those who least deserve them.”

“I don’t believe anything of the kind,” said Lady Carlton, “and, in fact, I never believe anything that I don’t see with my own eyes.”

“Well, if you were not blind, you might have seen it with your own eyes two hours ago,” said Mr. Beeswing, “when that ‘virago,’ as Virgil calls one of his heroines, stalked into the house.”

“Hush! pray hush!” said Lady Carlton. “Were it not that that dear good Colonel Barker is behaving so gallantly and talking to her so assiduously, I should be quite afraid. I really must leave off talking to you, and try to get something out of Count Pantouffles.”

“Try and see what you are able to get,” said Mr. Beeswing.

“How do you like High Beech, count?” said Lady Carlton.

“I like it very much,” said the count, grinning and showing his pearly teeth as usual.

“But how do you like the park?”

“The park?” said the count. “I have not yet seen him; when I have seen him I shall tell you.”

Now don’t any of you suppose that when the count called the park “him” he thought he was a man, or anything of the kind. He knew all about it; and in so saying perhaps he used better English than any of you. What do you say, for instance, to the gate in the Bible, which “opened to them of ‘his’ own accord?” So that you see Count Pantouffles was quite right, according to the grammar of the Bible, though he might seem very ridiculous to you who know so little of English grammar.

But you want to know what the young people

were doing while the elders were discoursing. The dinner-talk of old people is generally flat and dull. They have made their game, and rest on their oars; but young people have all their life before them, and their fortune is in their own hands, to mar or make. Of those four young persons at that dinner-table two were supremely happy and two rather miserable. Here you stop me to ask if Lady Sweetapple was a young person. How provoking you are! we have already told you that she was under thirty—will not that satisfy you? When you say that a woman is under thirty, it is like swearing to a man's property after his death. As, when you see in those paragraphs in the *Illustrated London News* which add a new terror to death, "The will of the late Alfred Hunks, of Barnsbury Park, has been sworn under four hundred thousand pounds," it means that he has left behind him, by a long course of probity and cheeseparing, about three hundred and ninety-five thousand pounds, his property being just below the higher level which carries a higher duty; so it is, when you say that a woman is under thirty, you mean she is close upon that age.

Now, though we should say that no woman of thirty is old, we should not call her young as compared with young ladies of nineteen or twenty.

Women of thirty, in fact, are neither young nor old. They are thirty ; and that's enough to satisfy any curiosity.

When we say the four young persons at that dinner-table, we do not include Lady Sweetapple. The four were, of course, Harry Fortescue and Edward Vernon, and Florence and Alice. The two that were supremely happy were Alice and Edward, who turned to one another as soon as grace was said—yes, Mrs. Free-and-easy, grace was always said at High Beech—and talked in the fulness and innocence of their hearts till Lady Carlton gathered up her ladies with her gloves, and they left the gentlemen to themselves. What did they talk about ? A thousand silly nameless things—of their friends and their foes ; of the balls that had been, and the balls that should be ; of fêtes and flower-shows ; and the Row, and the Zoo, and they were as happy as happy could be ; for they were not as yet in love ; or, rather, they were like our first parents in Eden —“they were in love and knew it not.” What wonder that Edward Vernon said to himself, “That's a very nice girl, I wish she hadn't so much money ! ” while Alice confided to Florence while they were doing their back-hair, that “she never knew Edward Vernon so very agreeable.”

That was the happy pair. The unhappy ones were Florry and Harry Fortescue. At first things went on very well. For a course and a half or so, as men measure dinners, Harry talked incessantly to Florry, and she thought, as she looked across the table at her sister and Edward Vernon, "We get on just as well as they do. This comes of not sitting opposite to the widow."

All this time Sir Thomas had been busy saying the usual cut-and-dried sentences to Lady Sweetapple. He was a keen observer, but a poor converser; and though no one appreciated wit better, no one was less witty than Sir Thomas. But after all there are only a certain number of commonplaces, just as they tell you there are only three or four popular tales, to which all the others may be reduced and restored. Piece the weather, and the theatre, and the opera, and the last novel together as much as you please, you cannot eke conversation out with them, unless you have a very fertile imagination, beyond a course and a half, or about a quarter of a dinner. Of course Lady Sweetapple might have drawn the baronet on and helped him out, for she was demonstrative as well as assimilative and receptive. She could, if you will have it in plain English, give as well as take. If she had a mind, she could have

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carried the war into the enemy's quarters, and so rallied the baronet by smart things, that she would have brought fire out of him as steel strikes it out of a flint. But she had no such mind. What she knew was, that Florry Carlton was sitting one off her, and between them Harry Fortescue. All she wanted was that the baronet's commonplaces might come to an end, and that she might see what she could do with Harry Fortescue.

When, therefore, Sir Thomas came to a full stop after some trivial observation, Lady Sweetapple turned to Harry and said—

“I wish to know, Mr. Fortescue, why you changed places with the count in the break?”

“It was all because of his eye,” said Harry, doggedly.

“If I were a man,” said Lady Sweetapple, “I should say that was a story; but I don’t say it, because you can’t call me out, and I don’t like to say things that lead to no result. Perhaps if I were a very vulgar man, I should say your excuse was ‘all my eye.’ Is not that a vulgar expression?”

“Very vulgar,” said Harry; “I can’t tell where you can have heard it.”

“It so happens that nothing is easier than to explain it. I used to hear that phrase at least ten times a day at one period of my life.”

Here Florry made an attempt at a rescue. Here was Harry being taken away from her by that odious woman, who would not talk to papa. It was just like her—just what she did at balls!

“Was that period of your life when you were very young, dear Lady Sweetapple?”

“Yes; when I was very, very young,” said Lady Sweetapple; “younger a good deal than you, I should say, and——”

“When you were not out?” asked Harry, rather listlessly.

“No; not at all. It was after I was married. In fact, it was a pet saying of my late husband. He never let a day pass without saying that something or other was ‘all my eye;’ and when he wanted to mark his entire disbelief in anything, he used to add, ‘and Betty Martin.’”

“I suppose you got very tired of hearing it,” said Harry.

“Oh dear, no; not at all,” said Lady Sweetapple. “He was such a good husband; and if it gave him pleasure, it did me no harm.”

This seems, I daresay, a very stupid conversation; but Lady Sweetapple was not so stupid as she seemed. At any rate, it gave her an opportunity of telling Harry that she did not believe

his story about the count's eye, and at the same time of telling Florence Carlton that she had been married long before she had reached her age, and that, by implication, she was at twenty-one little better than an old maid. At the same time, too, it pushed her own age back, for, of course, it makes a deal of difference to a widow of two or three years' standing if she was married at seventeen or twenty-one.

So that, on the whole, that digression about "my eye," and even about that most mythical personage, "Betty Martin," was not so purposeless or so stupid as it seemed.

At any rate, Florry felt she had been snubbed, and she relapsed at once into her inner consciousness, to wait for another opportunity.

"So you don't believe that it was pity for the count that made me change?"

"I don't believe one word of it. I am sure the count was never in your thoughts for a single moment."

"Who then?" asked Harry suddenly, as though he would catch Lady Sweetapple napping.

But Lady Sweetapple was not a woman to be caught napping. In that respect she would out-weazle all the weazles that ever slept with one eye open while the other was shut.

“How should I know? It is well known that there are few people worthy of Mr. Fortescue’s attention and consideration, at least, so far as his own opinion is concerned. How can I tell what woman was at that particular moment receiving the honour of what might be called your private addresses?”

“I assure you it was no woman,” said Harry, rather beginning to flounder. “If it wasn’t the count, it was the sun or something bright that shone just then in my eye.”

“It couldn’t have been the sun,” said the merciless woman, “for that was at your back. But if you get back to eyes again, only changing the eye from Count Pantouffles to yourself, I shall fall back again upon Sir John Sweetapple’s saying, and cry out, ‘All my eye,’ and I shall certainly mark my sense of your prevarication by adding ‘and Betty Martin.’”

“Vulgar wretch!” said Florry to herself, snorting with indignation. “I believe it was her own saying—that she never learnt it from poor Sir John, who, I have always heard, was very well bred. More than she is!”

Now, are we siding with Florry when she has these heart-burnings? Not at all. We are all at

liberty to side either with Lady Sweetapple or with Florry. It was just as natural to Amicia to try her chance with Harry Fortescue, as it was for Florry to feel hurt at what she considered the unfair proceedings of the widow. It is, in short, only the old story. When two women set their hearts on winning one man, neither will ever admit that the other has behaved well in a matter in which they are both justified.

By this time Lady Sweetapple thought she had made Harry feel sufficiently uncomfortable about his change of seat. She had gained her point, which was to find out whether he had really changed for the reason he had given. So she turned to another subject.

“How happy Mr. Vernon seems.”

“Who? Edward?” said Harry. “Well, why shouldn’t he be happy, sitting beside such a very nice girl?”

“Then you ought to be very happy,” said Lady Sweetapple, sinking her voice to a whisper, and tantalising Florry dreadfully, who was listening with all her ears.

“Why?” said Harry, in the same low voice.

“Because you are sitting near some one who is very fond of you.”

That, you see, was a fine stroke in Lady Sweetapple's game ; for while, in fact, she told Harry, if he chose to take it so, that she, Amicia, was very fond of him, she could say so with impunity by pretending it was Florry that she meant.

"Oh yes, indeed ; I see," said Harry — the stupid Harry not seeing what was meant, and hardly comprehending the words.

Now, it was bad enough for Florry to hear her rival talking out loud to Harry ; but when it got to whispering, she really could not put up with it.

"She'll have it all her own way unless I help the poor fellow," thought Florry ; and then she spoke out loud —

"Mr. Fortescue, are you going to Ascot races ?"

"I don't know," said Harry, really grateful for Florry's aid, and still wondering what Lady Sweetapple meant. "I don't know. It depends on the weather, or if I get a lift down on a drag, or whether I am asked to a pleasant house to lunch. Are you going, Miss Carlton ?"

"Oh, dear, no," said Florry ; "I only asked to know if you were going. Neither papa nor mamma like races."

Poor Florry ! here was another break, as they

say at billiards, which she had given to Lady Sweetapple. What a goose she was!

“Not like races! and Ascot races above all others?” said Lady Sweetapple. “As you seem undecided, Mr. Fortescue, let me help you to make up your mind. Come and stay with us at Ascot the week after next.”

“With *us*!” almost screamed Florry, who now saw the opening her silly tongue had afforded.

“Dear Miss Carlton,” said Lady Sweetapple, in her softest and most mischievous voice, “you may well be alarmed, so young as you are, at my asking Mr. Fortescue to come and stay with us. But pray observe the plural; I do not say ‘me’—that, of course, would be improper, and kind friends would say that I was compromised; but the fact is, dear old Lady Charity has taken a house at Ascot for me and herself, and we have agreed to ask some of our friends to stay with us for the race week, and, you know, whatever Lady Charity does is the very pink of propriety. Perhaps, Mr. Fortescue, you could persuade Mr. Vernon to come, too. You will then be perfectly happy. I know you are inseparables.”

Florry was really quite prostrated by the aggressive nature of Lady Sweetapple. Her candour, too, was most disgusting. Most young widows would

have been ashamed to ask a young man to come and stay with them ; but here was Lady Sweetapple taking shelter behind old Lady Charity's petticoat, and asking young men to stay with her during the Ascot week.

"It would be very delightful," said Harry ; "only I don't know Lady Charity."

"That is soon got over," said Lady Sweetapple. "Only leave your card on her as soon as we leave this place, and then you will receive an invitation in due form from her. Of course, I don't really ask any one, but somehow or other, no one will be there who is not a great friend of mine. She is so kind and considerate, dear Lady Charity ! and that's why I have been asking you two young men like a mad thing, just as if 'Heath Lodge' were my own house."

Now it was Florry's turn to whisper, "Shall you go to Ascot, Mr. Fortescue ?"

"Well, really I don't know," said Harry. "I haven't got the invitation yet, and I must speak to Edward. There are a dozen things to be done, and steps to be taken, before I go to Ascot."

He said this out loud, like a fool as he was. He ought to have known, when a lady, and a young lady, whispers to a man, she does not mean him to bawl

out his answer like a town-crier. Florry ought to have been disgusted with him, but she was not. She went on whispering—

“Don’t go to Ascot, Mr. Fortescue.”

She said this in such an imploring voice that Harry Fortescue began to wonder what could induce her to take so much interest in him. Or, if she did, why she asked him not to go to Ascot. At last he thought he had found out the reason and answered—

“Why not? I never bet. I never lost or won ten pounds in my life. It’s very pleasant seeing so many friends if the weather is fine. Why shouldn’t I go to Ascot?”

If Florry had dared to speak her own mind she would have said, “Because I wish it.” But then she was a young lady, a class who, as is well known, never dare to speak their own minds. So she said nothing, and again gave Lady Sweetapple a chance, of which she was not slow to avail herself, particularly as Harry’s loud way of answering Florry’s whispers had made it easy for her to guess that Florry was trying to set him against the visit.

“Very rightly answered, Mr. Fortescue. Why shouldn’t you go to Ascot?” and then, bridling up in her imperious way, she went on, “And if anybody asks you why you go to Ascot, mind you say

because Lady —— Charity asked me.” She said this in such a way that a little pause, just a blank long, came after lady ; and any one would have thought, as poor Florry did, that the Lady was to be followed by Sweetapple ; but though Charity followed, Harry knew, and Florry knew, that if Lady Sweetapple had dared, she would have said, “Because Lady Sweetapple asked me.”

“It is some comfort,” said Florry to herself, “that there *are* some things which even Lady Sweetapple can’t do ;” and she shed bitter internal tears to think that Harry Fortescue was as good as engaged to spend a week in Lady Sweetapple’s society at Ascot, all because of her silly question.

By this time the dinner had nearly come to an end, and, except for all this mortification to poor Florry, and a sort of feeling which Harry Fortescue had that he had been chaffed and led into half promising to go to Ascot against his will, and which made him rather unhappy, it must be confessed that it had gone off very well. No one, to see how pleasantly Mrs. Marjoram spoke and behaved to Colonel Barker, would have thought that she led the unhappy Marjoram such a life at home. Jealous as she was of him, it seemed that Mrs. Marjoram never once thought of him during dinner.

He was safe out of harm's way, and she had a gallant old officer by her side, who paid her the utmost deference. As for Mr. Marjoram, he behaved to Miss Markham much in the same way as Colonel Barker behaved to his wife. Occasionally, indeed, the watchful dragon said to herself that she would give him a curtain lecture that night for flirting so with the spinster. But the colonel's siege was so constant, and he left Mrs. Marjoram so little time to reflect, that she could not always keep her eye on Mr. Marjoram, and so he really had a very pleasant dinner, whatever might happen afterwards.

After all, we are not sure that Florry was not the only unhappy one of the party when the ladies swept out of the room. As for Lady Sweetapple, she was positively radiant with triumph as she rose from table; and if we consider what a cosmetic such little triumphs are to women, how they make their hearts beat, their cheeks glow, and their eyes beam bright—in fact, how necessary such a social conquest is to some women's minds, we can understand how Florry, in the bitterness of her heart, could whisper to Alice, as soon as they got into the drawing-room—

“Did you ever see Lady Sweetapple look half so ugly?”

“Half so ugly, Florry?” asked Alice, in unfeigned surprise. “Half so lovely, you mean. I think she looks more beautiful than I ever saw her before. It is quite clear that High Beech agrees with her.”

“No,” said Florry, in a downright way. “I stick to what I said—half so ugly. To my mind she is positively hideous.”





CHAPTER XIII.

AFTER DINNER AT HIGH BEECH.

JT was some time before the gentlemen joined the ladies. There were more middle-aged men than young ones, and one or two of them were wont to linger over their wine. Colonel Barker had not served so long in India, and marched so often over sandy deserts, and encountered storms of dust, not to have contracted a habit of thirst which often wanted slaking. Once, when he fancied himself failing, his doctor wanted him to leave off wine and take to water.

“I tell you what it is, doctor,” said the colonel, “you know nothing of my constitution. It abhors water as nature abhors a vacuum. I believe I could live without drinking at all, better than live on water alone. In all my army experience I never heard of a man who drank water; and by Jove, sir —when Colonel Barker was excited he always said ‘by Jove’ —in the —th Regiment of Foot Fire-eaters

any man who drank water would have been cut and sent to Coventry. Don't tell me that half the regiments in the service are now teetotallers. That's a proof, if any were wanted, that the service is going to the dogs. It will be quite gone when all Her Majesty's regiments are teetotallers. In my time, I say, we never drank water; and so long as Jerry Barker has a mouth he hopes never to put any cold water into it except to clean his teeth."

Of course Colonel Barker loved his bottle; but he loved it wisely, not too well. There was not the man alive who could say that he had ever seen Jerry Barker the worse for liquor; and when we say that he loved his bottle, we only mean of course in moderation.

Nor was Mr. Beeswing, of the noble family of Port, and politically connected, as he said, with Portugal and its staple product through the Methuen treaty, at all averse to good Port wine. He could take his share when he chose, and if he regretted anything of the past it was the days when he could sit with Theodore Hook by the fire in the dining-room of the *Sarcophagus Club*, and drink each a bottle of '20 port, and then return home as jolly, as the saying used to be, as "sand-boys." We suppose, as sand-boys follow a very dry and

dusty trade, they are traditionally believed to require a great deal of liquor to moisten their clay.

None of you, too, I hope will deny the consolation of a good glass of wine to Mr. Marjoram.

“What an unhappy man Marjoram will be when there is no sitting after dinner,” said Mr. Beeswing. “For then he will be robbed of the only escape from Mrs. Marjoram, which he is now permitted to enjoy. No doubt he would long since have committed suicide were it not for these rare moments when he can drink a glass of wine with his friends without having the fear of Mrs. Marjoram before his eyes.”

As for Harry and Edward, they belong rather to the new school. They were smokers of tobacco rather than drinkers of wine; but they were good fellows, and good sitters and listeners, and so they sat as staunch as setters that evening at High Beech, even though Harry wished to have some more explanation with Lady Sweetapple, and Edward was longing to sit again by the side of Alice.

“How much worse the latter part of a dinner is than the first!” he said, as he thought of all the sweet minutes that had passed between him and Alice Carlton.

You must not be surprised, therefore, to hear that



Colonel Barker told some very long and very good stories; that Mr. Beeswing was even more merry and facetious than usual; that Sir Thomas caught his hilarity, and actually told a story in which no man, however stupid or however clever, could ever have seen the point. Even Mr. Marjoram beamed up, his face glowed, and it is not at all certain that he would not have sung a song at the instigation of Harry Fortescue had not Edward restrained him, because he wanted so very much to rejoin Alice.

But we have no time to tell you more of all that joviality. Those brilliant sallies will remain for ever unknown, because we have no space to record them. And now the men have risen and are with the ladies in the drawing-room.

“How long you have been, dear!” said Lady Carlton.

“Yes, I know we have,” said Sir Thomas; “we were all such old friends, all except those boys”—by which he meant Harry and Edward—“that we went on telling story after story, and time passed before we knew where we were. But what is the time? Dear me, half-past eleven! Why, it will soon be time to go to bed.”

“Indeed it will,” said Lady Carlton; “and here

has Lady Sweetapple been singing us such beautiful songs, and the girls have played their duets, and Alice has sung in her small way ; and—what else ? Oh, Mrs. Marjoram has been dying for the appearance of Colonel Barker that she might have a game at piquet with him, which she promised him. You men have much to answer for.”

By this time Mr. Marjoram had approached the awful presence of his wife.

“ Mr. Marjoram,” said that lady, “ your face is very red.”

“ No, it isn’t, my dear ; at least, not redder than Colonel Barker’s. Look at his.”

This was an unparalleled breach of discipline on the part of Mr. Marjoram, which was only excusable because, as the newspapers say, “ he had partaken of some wine.” But it was not an excuse which Mrs. Marjoram could allow.

“ Mr. Marjoram,” she said, “ I have often told you, but you will never understand me, that what is perfectly proper and suitable for one person is quite unsuited to another. You say Colonel Barker’s face is redder than yours. That assertion I am prepared to deny ; but, even if it were true, which it is not, what you say would prove nothing as to the redness of your face, for Colonel Barker’s face is naturally

red—red from the honourable profession which he has followed, from his hardships by land and sea. It is as natural for a gallant soldier's face to be red as for his coat to be of the same colour. Mr. Marjoram, I say again, your face is very red, and I want to know why."

"Then I can't tell you," said Mr. Marjoram, who was sufficiently elated to be able to set the tyrant at defiance.

"Mr. Marjoram, I will not protract this painful discussion to-night. We will renew it to-morrow morning."

But, alas! her words of wisdom were wasted in the air, for Mr. Marjoram had departed from her side, and taken refuge in the conservatory, where, oddly enough, he came suddenly upon Alice and Edward behind a large *Datura*. It is quite true that Harry Fortescue and Lady Sweetapple were seated on a bench not far off, but both couples were so intent on their own proceedings that they were no protection to one another, and so Mr. Marjoram stumbled over both of them in the half light.

"What a bore!" said Harry. "Why will not old fogies keep to themselves?"

By which, no doubt, he meant that they should be *cerné*, as men of forty-five used to be in the Cercle

at Paris, in which club a man of that age is supposed to be unfit to associate with any reasonable being, and condemned to perpetual conversation with other old fogies like himself. This fact leads one to think on the comparative ages of men in different countries, and sometimes to regret that our very young men of sixty would sometimes reflect that it is time they retired from the rôle of *jeune premier*, and left the field open to the rising generation.

This invasion of Mr. Marjoram was quite enough to recall the two couples in the conservatory to the drawing-room. Where, you will ask, was Florry? Poor thing! she had retired to bed before the gentlemen joined the ladies, having, as Lady Carlton informed Lady Sweetapple, "a very bad headache." We need hardly say that for "head" in the above sentence should be read "heart." Miss Florence Carlton had retired in disgust at having been seated in the dinner campaign against what she declared to Alice was "the common enemy."

And now it was high time for every one to go to bed. Certainly for all the ladies, who, under the leadership of Lady Carlton and Alice, went off upstairs. Before they went, however, Mrs. Barker had time to say to the colonel, "You won't be long, I am

sure ; ” while Mrs. Marjoram solemnly held up one finger to Mr. Marjoram, who had now returned to the light of night, after falling over seat after seat in the conservatory, and, in a sepulchral voice, said, “ Mr. Marjoram, beware ! ”

When the ladies had all glided from the room, the thread-paper figure of Mrs. Marjoram bringing up the rear, Mr. Marjoram heaved a deep sigh of relief, while Colonel Barker, addressing himself to the company in general, asked—

“ Does any one wish to smoke ? ”

He need not have asked this question, seeing that he had been smoking with Harry and Edward and Count Pantouffles that very afternoon, when he led them on to listen to the story of his exploits against the Ram Chowdah. But probably he only asked by way of reminding all whom it might concern that, to some constitutions, tobacco is a necessity before going to bed.

“ I never smoke, you know, Jerry,” said Sir Thomas ; “ nor does Beeswing, I believe. But Harry and Edward smoke like manufactory chimneys, and ”—looking at Mr. Marjoram—“ what do you say, Marjoram ? ”

“ I should like to smoke,” said Mr. Marjoram doggedly.

“Why, I thought you never smoked,” said Sir Thomas.

“I have learned to smoke,” said Mr. Marjoram, with great gravity, “and I mean to smoke.”

“Every one to his taste and humour in this house. High Beech is not exactly Liberty Hall, but we try to let every one have his way. Here, Podager, show these gentlemen to the smoking-room; and, after that, let me wish you all a good-night.”

We are not going to follow these five Nicotians to the smoking-room. No doubt they smoked many pipes, and settled the whole affairs of the kingdom to their hearts' content. In a smoking-room, as is well known, every one sees all things, as it were, through a glass, darkly, and what seems bright and clear to his wits overnight, is next morning as confused and muddy as ditch-water. We consider, then, that the great thoughts of the smoking-room are only fitted for the atmosphere of the smoking-room itself, and we gladly leave them untold. We much prefer to follow the ladies up-stairs, and to see what they have to say for themselves.

And first for Florry. When Alice Carlton went up-stairs, having left Lady Sweetapple at the door of the Butterfly-room, while Lady Carlton went along the gallery with Mrs. Barker and Mrs. Mar-

joram, she found Florry pretending to be asleep, having torn the flowers from her hair, and thrown herself on the sofa.

“Poor dear thing!” said Alice; “if she is asleep I won’t wake her just yet.”

And so she went on letting down her hair, and taking off her ornaments. Then, all at once stopping in her attempts to loosen that string, or slacken that lace, she began to talk to herself.

“Yes, it was very nice. I wonder if Edward thought it nice too?” Then a little more slackening and loosening, and she went on, as she slipped on her violet dressing-gown—

“Poor Florry! she was not so happy, I am afraid. I don’t think she found Harry so nice as I found Edward.”

All this she said sitting at the glass with her back to Florry, and really thinking of nothing but Edward and her back-hair, when all at once she felt a grasp on her shoulder, and there stood Florry, wide awake, behind her.

“Dear me, Florry, how you frightened me! I thought you were asleep.”

“Asleep! I wasn’t asleep for a moment,” said Florry. “I was only shamming, to hear what you would say. You are quite right—quite right, at

least, in one part of what you said, and quite wrong in another. I did not find it nice at dinner. There you were right. But I found Harry nicer than ever. There you were wrong."

"You are very good to say so, Florry; good, I mean, to Harry Fortescue, for I must say I think he flirted a good deal with Lady Sweetapple. There—I do not think he was so nice as Edward Vernon."

"I don't at all agree with you," said Florry, eager to shield Harry. "How could he help flirting, as you say? I only call it answering when that odious widow cross-questioned him about everything."

"Well," said Alice, "I only mean that Edward never spoke one word to any one but me during dinner, and that's what I call so nice."

"Very fine," said Florry; "but who can tell what he might have done and said if he had been sitting between you and Lady Sweetapple? He might have behaved worse than Harry, who, after all, I declare did not behave at all ill."

"I am so glad you are satisfied, dear," said Alice, who saw there was no use in prolonging the discussion that night. "She can't always be sitting next to Harry, and, after all, she is only here for five days."

"That's all very true," said Florry, relapsing into

her doleful mood again, “and I shouldn’t care if I were always with them—I mean if Harry and she were always here—and I could watch them. That is just the worst of it; the five days will soon be over. They will both go away as they came, perhaps together. She will go to Ascot races and he will go to Ascot races, and then who can tell what may happen?”

“Go to bed, goose,” said Alice, “and trust in Providence, or, better still, to yourself. You never ought to think it possible that such a man as Harry Fortescue can care for Lady Sweetapple, and if you only believed it, her reign would be soon over. But go to bed, darling; it will be all right to-morrow.”

So the two sisters were soon in bed and asleep, but their dreams were very different. Alice thought that she was walking all night long with Edward Vernon through the most charming gardens and delightful groves, and she only awoke when the sun was shining in on her, and she awoke with a start, exclaiming, “How happy I have been!”

Poor Florry, on the other hand, climbed up steep hills in search of Harry Fortescue, and just as she caught sight of him it seemed that Lady Sweetapple pounced upon him out of a cross path, and carried him off, and the more she followed them the farther

she seemed from overtaking them, and at last down she fell, poor thing, to the bottom of a steep precipice, and so she awoke, like Alice, with a start, but not one of pleasure, for what she cried out was, "Dear me, what a weary night I have had!"





CHAPTER XIV.

HOW LADY SWEETAPPLE AND MR. MARJORAM WENT TO BED.

AHEN Lady Sweetapple went into the Butterfly-room, it was only to find the faithful Crump waiting to undress her. She was not at all like the Carltons, who always made Palmer go to bed early, and undressed themselves. "What is the good of working the poor thing to death?" they said; while Lady Sweetapple said, "What is the use of keeping a maid if she is to go to bed and do no work?"

Still, Lady Sweetapple was not in the least hard-hearted. She had always had a maid to undress her, and we verily believe that without a maid she could never have gone to bed at all.

"I hope you are comfortable, Crump."

"Yes, thank you, my lady; and Mr. Podager, which he is the butler, is a very pleasant man. The under servants do treat him with great respect,

and in right of you, my lady, I sat next him at supper, and he called me Lady Sweetapple."

"Lady Sweetapple!" said Lady Sweetapple with surprise.

"La, my lady," said the ingenuous Mrs. Crump, "don't you know that in all respectable houses the upper servants that come to stay always takes the names of their masters and mistresses? Mr. Beeswing's gentleman sits opposite to me on Mr. Podager's right hand, because he is the servant of an Honourable, and when Mr. Podager do ask us to take a glass of claret, he says, 'Beeswing, try a glass of that, it will do you good; and, Lady Sweetapple'—that's me, my lady—'let me recommend you some of our fine old port.'"

But Lady Sweetapple was not content with these revelations of high life below stairs. She wanted to know what the servants thought of the guests. It was mean, we know, but Lady Sweetapple was a woman, and wanted to know.

"And what do they say of me, of me really, Crump?"

"La, my lady, they do say you are very pretty, and Mr. Podager do say your'n is the prettiest face that has ever come to High Beech, and he offered to bet Mr. Sleek, the groom of the chambers, that you were.

‘But how is it to be settled?’ said Mr. Sleek, who, you must know, my lady, was standing up for Miss Florry, who, Lord bless you, is no more fit to be compared to your ladyship than chalk is to cheese——”

“Stop, stop!” said Lady Sweetapple.

“Well, but, my lady, I must finish. Where was I? Oh! ‘Yes, how is it to be settled?’ said Mr. Sleek. ‘I know,’ says Mr. Podager; ‘we’ll get Mr. Fortescue to decide the bet.’ ‘No he sha’n’t,’ says Mr. Sleek. ‘He shall,’ says Mr. Podager. ‘He sha’n’t,’ says Mr. Sleek. ‘Why not?’ asks Mr. Podager. ‘Because he’s too fond of Lady Sweetapple—which it is not you,’ he says to me, my lady, ‘but your mistress. He would never be a fair judge.’”

“And how did it end?” asked Lady Sweetapple.

“Why, my lady, you may well ask. I really did think Mr. Podager and Mr. Sleek would have come to blows, for Mr. Podager says he is sure you are what he calls the objeck of Mr. Fortescue’s affeck-shuns, while Mr. Sleek declares his heart is irrewocably set on Miss Florry. At last Mr. Beeswing’s gentleman came forward as a peacemaker, and what he said was, ‘You’re both of you two fools. I knows

on the best authority that Mr. Fortescue do not care one brass farthing about either of them ladies.”

“Did he say who the real lady was?” asked Lady Sweetapple with some emotion.

“No, my lady; and I do think Mr. Podager were quite right when he called on him to name the name or hold his tongue. But he was obstinate, and said his information was confidential, and so he wouldn’t tell.”

All the while that the voluble Crump had been pouring out all this housekeeper’s-room gossip, her fingers had been hard at work dismantling her ladyship, and having had the privilege of being present, we can say that Lady Sweetapple bore the process very well. She looked as well without her war-paint as with it, which is not what every woman can say.

“Can I do anything more, my lady?” said Mrs. Crump with a yawn, for it was getting very late.

“No, thank you, Crump,” said Lady Sweetapple; “you may go.” Then, just as Mrs. Crump was vanishing into her own room, “But, Crump, stop!”

“Yes, my lady,” said Mrs. Crump, reappearing in the doorway.

“How old is Mr. Beeswing’s servant?”

“How old? La, my lady, how should I know any gentleman’s age?”

“Stuff!” said Lady Sweetapple. “You are a woman, and not so bad-looking, Crump. I am sure you know his age.”

“Well, my lady, I can guess it; leastways I think he’s not more than forty-five.”

“And you, Crump, were twenty at the last census, nine years ago. Go along, Crump; and be sure, when you bring me my cup of tea tomorrow morning, to tell me the name of the lady Mr. Beeswing’s servant meant.”

“But, my lady, gentlemen’s gentlemen don’t get up so early. They are generally snoring when your ladyship has your cup of tea.”

“Well, then, let it be after breakfast, at ten or eleven o’clock. Don’t forget, Crump; and now be off to bed.”

“How strange!” said Amicia, musing to herself when Mrs. Crump had departed. “I am not sure that he cares one bit for me, and I am quite certain that he does not care one bit for Florence Carlton; and now this fool of a gentleman’s gentleman confirms my suspicion that Harry Fortescue really cares for some one else.”

But Lady Sweetapple was not a woman to spoil

her beauty by fretting in the night watches. She was soon as sound asleep as Alice Carlton; and, if her dreams were not quite so rosy as those of that young lady, she was in no wise a prey to the succession of nightmares with which poor Florry was haunted.

In the smoking-room, meanwhile, the tobacco college had finished its sittings, visibly not to the satisfaction of Mr. Marjoram, who confessed to his friends that he had not smoked for twenty years, and only did it now to show Mrs. Marjoram that he had not lost his strength of head. As he felt thirsty, too, he had mixed himself two tumblers of brandy-and-water.

“Faith,” said Colonel Barker to Harry Fortescue, behind a great cloud of smoke, “it’s not so much strength of head as strength of hand that will be tried on poor Marjoram when he goes up to bed. I wouldn’t be in his shoes for something with that virago. Ah, you boys, take warning by Marjoram, and don’t marry a termagant.”

“We are going to bed, Mr. Marjoram,” said Harry. “Won’t you come?”

“I should like to stay here till morning,” said Mr. Marjoram, in rather a husky voice.

“No, old fellow,” said Colonel Barker, “it can’t

be ; you'd catch your death of cold, even though it is June. We shan't let you ; it's our duty to see you safe up to bed."

"Well, I suppose it's all right," said Mr. Marjoram, putting out his cigar with great deliberation, and then thrusting it into his lucifer-box. "Let it lie there till next time. What fun smoking is ! "

"He'll find it anything but fun," said Harry to Edward, "when he gets up to Mrs. Marjoram."

Now they agreed they really must go. So they shook hands, and Mr. Marjoram promised them all his eternal friendship, and ended by inviting them all to come and stay with him and Mrs. Marjoram.

"Most delightful, enchanting woman," he said. "Quite a woman of the world."

"Yes, yes," said Colonel Barker, on whom all drinking and smoking only seemed to make him more cool and collected. "Now we must go to bed."

Then, taking Mr. Marjoram by the arm, he drew him into the passage out of the smoking-room, and so across the hall, and up the slippery staircase, and then down the corridor to the Green-room, in which that wakeful dragon, Mrs. Marjoram, was supposed to be at rest. By this time, we are sorry to say, chiefly from the effects of the cigar and the

brandy-and-water, Mr. Marjoram was in a condition which incapacitated him from turning the handle of the door. The gallant colonel, therefore, had again to be equal to the occasion, to turn the handle, to push the door gently open, disregarding Mrs. Marjoram's exclamation, "Who's there?" and then, having surrendered Mr. Marjoram's candle to his own keeping, to propel him into the room, to shut the door, turn the handle, and vanish from that part of the corridor as quickly as possible.

Truth compels us to say that Mr. Marjoram, on entering the room, after floundering about a little tripped over a fold of the carpet, and fell forward with a crash which alarmed Mrs. Barker two or three rooms off, and extinguished his light. We decline to say what followed, but you may imagine how Mrs. Marjoram rushed out of bed to raise her fallen slave, her worst suspicions as to the cause of his face becoming so red after dinner being thus confirmed. It is reported that, on groping for the box of lucifer-matches, she found that half-smoked cigar which her unhappy husband had deposited for safety in that receptacle, and, after vainly trying to make it ignite on the rough part of the box, threw it away in disgust, only to find it on the floor as soon as she struck a light, and thus to prove another flagrant

delinquency against Mr. Marjoram, who had stumbled into an arm-chair, and was already half asleep.

It was in vain that she dinned into his ears the necessity of waking up and getting to bed. Whether she tried the force of her hand in the way Colonel Barker had suggested in the smoking-room is unknown; but it is reported that, farther on in the night, or rather in the early dawn, Mrs. Marjoram was overheard by a maid passing down the corridor expostulating with her husband, and that he replied by declaring his intention of "not going home till morning."

But, whatever happened, it is no part of our duty to tell. There were many excuses for Mr. Marjoram, who really had not smoked for twenty years, and who had never been known before to have behaved in any such manner. If any of you are still inclined to blame this very worthy man for a temporary indiscretion, let us entreat you to remember that Mrs. Marjoram was an awful temper, and that Mr. Marjoram had many excuses for falling under temptation.

"Dear heart! how long you have been!" said Mrs. Barker to the colonel. "I am so glad you are come. I thought you were never coming."

She had not got any further than this, and the

colonel had not yet taken off his stock, which was always the first thing he did, when they both heard the awful crash occasioned by Mr. Marjoram's fall.

"What in the world is it?" said Mrs. Barker.
"Is it an earthquake?"

"Not at all," said Colonel Barker, who had recovered his self-possession. "It is only Mr. Marjoram, who has been smoking a bad cigar, which always makes a man stagger and fall."

"But hadn't you better run out and help him?"

"No," said Colonel Barker; "he is in Mrs. Marjoram's hands, and that is quite enough both for me and for him. Now let me get to bed, and have some sleep."

In less than two minutes there might have been heard along that corridor a sound as of bagpipes and swarming bees. Let no one be alarmed; it was only Colonel Barker sleeping the sleep of the just, taking and retaking, it may be, in his dreams the hill fort of the Ram Chowdah, and again putting him and his tigers to ignominious flight. Happy Colonel Barker, and most unhappy Mr. Marjoram!



CHAPTER XV.

HOW THEY ALL GOT UP, AND HOW MR. MARJORAM
HAD A MORNING LECTURE.

FEW forgot to say last night how Harry Fortescue and Edward Vernon felt, and how they went to bed. It takes so long a time to put a whole party to bed that we left out the bachelors. All we have to say about them is, that both the young men slept remarkably well, as, indeed, young men usually do. As for Edward Vernon, as he was in love with Alice, everything went so smoothly that he had no reason to lie awake fretting and putting questions to himself as to what could have happened if something else had not happened, or had happened; what Alice meant by this or that; and why he had not done something which he ought to have done. All this self-crucifixion might come to him later, but it had not come yet. He too slept the sleep of the just. He would have slept the clock round if he had not been called at eight.

Harry Fortescue, too, slept well. He was certainly in love neither with Lady Sweetapple nor with Florence Carlton, and it remains to be seen whether there was any truth in his affection for that mythical person conjured up by Mr. Beeswing's gentleman, the mere mention of whom by Mrs. Crump had so alarmed Lady Sweetapple. Harry Fortescue was altogether a stronger nature than Edward Vernon. He did not take things so much to heart; and, wherever his heart might be, he certainly slept quite as well on that warm night of the 1st of June as Edward Vernon. He chased no rosy spirits, fled from no phantoms, and fell over no precipices in his slumbers. When he was called he jumped out of bed, and as he stood in his bath, he said, as he looked out across the park, "By Jove, what a lovely morning!"

There were always prayers at High Beech. Ever since the house had stood there were morning prayers, and for a long time evening prayers too. It is only lately that we have cut off half our family devotions in most well-regulated families, because evening prayers fit in so very awkwardly with our social arrangements. In the good old times we should all of us have been flocking in to evening prayers just about the time that nowadays dinner is half over. The result is, that evening

prayers are almost as rare as the bustard in Great Britain, and, like a steam-boat with one engine disabled, the nation goes on at half-prayer power, or morning prayers alone. So at High Beech there were morning prayers alone, but it was the rule of the house that every one, if it were at all possible, should attend them. It was a good rule, Sir Thomas used to say, considered from the lowest point of view —that it ensured regularity at breakfast; just in the same way as some dons at Oxford assert that morning chapel is so good because it pulls undergraduates out of bed at seven, and so makes them a present of two hours more in the day, during which they may improve their minds. "High Beech was not an inn," Sir Thomas used to say, in which every man could do as he liked, get up when he liked, go to bed when he liked, and have his breakfast when he liked. Breakfast could not be going on till half-past twelve. It came after prayers, at half-past nine, and it was all over by half-past ten. If you were ill or weak, you might have your breakfast up-stairs, and thank your stars if Lady Carlton, in the goodness of her heart, did not send for Mr. Squills to come and see how you were. If you were well and strong overnight you were expected to sit down to breakfast at half-past nine, and you were all the

more respected—though it cannot be said you were ever actually proctorised, or in other words, snubbed, for not doing so—if you came down at a quarter-past nine when the gong called all the household together into the hall for prayers.

Now if any unearnest youth of either sex declares, after reading the above exposition of the breakfast and prayer-meetings at High Beech, that he or she had rather not go to High Beech, to be such a slave to old-fashioned ideas, all we can say is, that it will only be his or her loss; for, in our opinion, a visit to High Beech is quite one of the pleasantest things that can befall any man or woman of any age; and for our own part, we are always ready to go to High Beech when we are asked.

It so happened that every one who was in the house on the 2nd of June, 1870, knew the rule of the house. At eight or half-past, therefore, every one got out of bed, “shook off dull sloth,” and made him ready for the day.

“Just what I said, my lady,” said Mrs. Crump, as she brought Lady Sweetapple that cup of tea at eight, “Mr. Beeswing’s gentleman is not ‘visible.’ I have just set eyes on him at the end of the gallery taking Mr. Beeswing his hot water, but I have had no conversation with him.”

“ Well,” said Lady Sweetapple, “ mind you ask him, Crump ; not right out, of course, before all the rest of the servants, but quietly, you know, and try to find out the young lady’s name.”

“ Yes, my lady.”

“ And, Crump, how do I look ? I have had such a good night.”

“ Oh, my lady,” said the politic Crump, “ you look as my lady always looks, lovely.”

“ I did not ask that, Crump. You know very well I meant if I looked well.”

“ Indeed, my lady, it’s all the same to you whether you look well or lovely ; for, as my poor mother used to say, health and looks always go together.”

“ Then you think I look strong and in good health,” said Lady Sweetapple.

“ Certainly, my lady ; I never see you look better since I have been with you.”

Now, half the readers of this story may think this all silly vanity on the part of Lady Sweetapple. She ought, they will say, to have been quite above such trifling. But putting aside, for the moment, the question whether men are not quite as vain of their personal appearance as women, only just consider how much more serious a thing the loss of looks is to a woman than to a man. A man, say a soldier,

and a good-looking one, goes into action in the service of his country, and a musket-ball just flies past his face and takes off his nose, which may be as prominent a mark as the Duke of Wellington's, or the toucan's. Well, he returns to England, disfigured, as his mother says, for life, and wears a black patch over his face where his nose ought to be, or has an enamelled nose, like the notary in About's story, or an india-rubber or gutta-percha nose. We say there is no reason why that man should not marry any one. So, also, a man may have the smallpox, and be pitted like a Wimbledon target; there is no reason why he should not marry any one. Of course a girl would sooner marry a man with a nose, unless it were as long as the nose of Slawkenbergius, and a man unpitted with the smallpox. All we say is, that those disfigurements are no serious obstacle to marriage in a man. But let a young lady lose her nose in a railway accident. Let her opposite neighbour, for instance, in the spasmotic clutching of such a catastrophe, when he is thrown forward into her lap, suddenly grasp her nose and tweak and twist it off, she may possibly get in compensation from the Railway Company £250; perhaps—but in our opinion she will never get a husband, unless he were a blind one; and fortunately, though

love is proverbially blind, husbands are not often so afflicted. In the same way, let a lovely young lady, in all the pride of her beauty, refuse to be revaccinated, catch the loathsome disease, and lose, not her life, but what is far worse, her looks, how shall she ever get a husband? Let a horse bite off her nose, and where would she be in the marriage market? Nowhere! You see, therefore, that men and women start from quite different steps, and look at looks from a very different point of view. Without going so far as some philosopher has said—"Looks are nothing to a man, but everything to a woman"—we may be sure that the loss of them is much more serious in the one case than the other. Here some Bekkerite, male or female, will say—"As if marriage and a husband are things on which every woman's heart is set!" Well, if we could get rid of marriage, stop the supply of children, and so bring about the millennium, say in about a hundred years from this year of disgrace, 1871, we should be quite ready to try. But so long as the mass of men and women turn a deaf ear to the warning of the Bekkerites, and persist in rushing blindly down the steep hill of matrimony, we are bound to declare, in the interest of truth, that the feeling of the age is against the new light; that women do wish to be

married and have husbands ; and that as looks are a great help to women towards that end, there can be no doubt that they are more important to women than to men, for the all-important reason which we have stated above.

Lady Sweetapple, therefore, was not so silly or perhaps so vain as some of you believe ; and if she were, almost every one of you at her time of life has undergone the same desire to know how your looks last ; and, let us add, if a lady is not to ask her own maid how she looks the first thing in the morning, we should like to know when she is justified in putting the question.

Now look at what was passing two doors off.

“ Do I look a horrid fright ? ” asked Florry, as she got out of bed with the feeling that her face was on fire, her eyes red, her lips cracked, and her tongue parched.

“ Not at all, darling,” said Alice. “ Just a little worn, but nothing to speak of. How do I look ? ”

“ Charming ; perhaps a little heavy in the eyelids from over-sleep. Too satisfied-looking, I should say,” said Florry ; and then with a sigh, “ How I wish I could be satisfied ! ”

“ Satisfied ! What do you mean, Florry ? ” said Alice, looking rather scared.

“ Why I mean what I say—satisfied with myself, with Harry, with that widow! Do you know, love, I don’t know whether I am altogether satisfied with you, you seem so happy and I feel so wretched.”

“ Now, there’s a darling,” said Alice, “ don’t fall a-crying, and make your pretty face ugly. Remember it’s only an hour to prayers.”

“ I suppose there’s no use trying to be happy,” said Florry, plunging her face into cold water. “ It will be all the same in the end—all the same a hundred years hence.”

“ That’s not what Mr. Rubrick says,” said Alice. “ He says, every Sunday, it does matter, or will matter a good deal.”

“ Yes,” said Florry, “ I know what he says; but then it seems such a very long way off.”

At this moment the faithful Palmer appeared, and cut short a conversation between the sisters which threatened to take a very serious turn. The very first words that worthy woman uttered were—

“ Why bless me, Miss Florry, what a fright you do look! What have you been a-doing to yourself?”

“ Not had a very good night,” said Florry, spluttering it out as she again ducked her face under the water.

“ Yes, yes, I see,” said Palmer. “ It all comes

from young ladies not having their beauty sleep. Ah, those old sayings are true, and if young ladies go on sitting up till one o'clock, and sometimes more, why soon there'll be no pretty girls left in the country, they'll all grow so wan and wizened."

"And how do I look?" said Alice, again trying to come to the rescue of Florry.

"Very nice, my love," said Palmer. "You look as if you had got your natural rest. Mr. Edward will be glad to see you."

"Mr. Edward? What nonsense, Palmer! Don't talk of such a thing. I don't know who you mean by Mr. Edward."

"Never mind," said Palmer. "I know who I mean. Don't you, Miss Florry?"

"No, I don't," said Florry doggedly. "I know nothing about it."

"None so blind, miss, as those that won't see, or, what is worse, as those who are looking so hard another way that they can't see what's going on under their very noses."

"I think, Palmer," said Alice with unusual dignity, "that it must be time you went and had your breakfast. Florry and I can get on very well together."

It was one merit of Palmer's that, though she

was plain-spoken, she could always take a hint. In a minute Palmer had vanished, without saying another word except to herself. It must, however, be owned that she revenged herself on Alice for stopping her mouth by soliloquising all the way down to the housekeeper's-room—

“As if I were a blind old beetle! I that knows them as if they were my own children, which I have never had. Here's Miss Alice as happy as a queen because Mr. Edward—I know who I mean, and I will call him Mr. Edward—because Mr. Edward sat next her at dinner, and spoke to no one else. That's why she looks so well this morning; and then there's Miss Florry, she is looking as ragged as a cuckoo, and hangs down her head like a faded daffydowndilly, because Mr. Harry—that's all the same as Mr. Fortescue, and a very handsome young man he is—talked more to Lady Sweetapple than he did to her. Gentlefolks think that we servants know nothing; but we have eyes and ears, and heads and hearts, just as much as they have, and very often while they are eating and drinking, and amusing themselves before us, just as if we were deaf and dumb, we are taking notes, at least the gentlemen are, to tell them down-stairs, and they have told them, and this is what they was a-saying

last night when Mr. Podager and Mr. Sleek had such a quarrel."

By this time Mrs. Palmer had reached the house-keeper's-room, and as she found many ready to talk to her and to listen to her, she left off talking to herself.

Now let us go to the apartments of the unhappy Marjoram. At an early period of the morning Mrs. Marjoram, we regret to say it, had expelled her husband from her bed-room, and shut him up in his dressing-room, because he snored so she could get no rest. What he did, having by that time shaken off his tobacco poison, is not exactly known. It is believed, however, that he spent the early morning in an easy-chair in a succession of dozing fits, broken every five minutes by a sudden start.

But now, at eight o'clock, Mrs. Marjoram is out of bed. She was one of those women who always get up at seven to the second at home, and at eight when they are on a visit, and which only means that they would get up at seven in other people's houses if they could, only other people are not such fools. On those occasions, therefore, they lie awake brooding on their wrongs and planning vengeance against their enemies.

We have already said that Mrs. Marjoram was of

a jealous disposition, and now we will prove it. Pray observe that jealousy is the most unreasonable and unreasoning of all the passions; love bottled up till it has turned sour, it is defined by one of the psychologists—though which at this moment we really forget, so that if any painstaking reader wishes to verify this quotation, which, however, we are ready to affirm on oath that we have read, he will have to read through all the psychologists; having done which, perhaps he will be good enough to tell us if he has found the quotation. Yes, love bottled up till it has turned sour; that will do very well, and that being so, we proceed to say that Mrs. Marjoram was neither a pint nor a quart, but a magnum of jealousy. Wine in magnums, as is well known, lasts longer than wine in quarts; how jealous, therefore, must Mrs. Marjoram have been to turn a whole magnum sour!

But to come to the proof. You know that the unhappy Marjoram had taken Miss Markham, the old maid of High Beech, in to dinner, and had seemed quite happy with her. It was not at all unlikely that he should have been happy, for Miss Markham, though as withered as an apple of last year in June, and as old as the hills, was one of the cheeriest and most sympathetic people in the world. Why she had

never married fifty years ago no one could tell. It is so easy to forget the reasons for things that have happened fifty years ago. No one ever seemed to know when she came to High Beech—for you must know there was a village as well as a hall of High Beech—but there, in a cottage just outside one of the park gates, lived Miss Markham, who had grown to be one of the institutions of the neighbourhood. It was not a very big cottage, but it was very tidy. Not a speck of dirt was to be seen in any part of it, and the blinds were so white, and the furniture all so bright and shining, it seemed as if twenty men-servants must have been constantly rubbing and polishing it. Yet no one ever saw any one dusting, or tidying, or rubbing the furniture. It was an old, old cottage of brick, pargeted with beams of oak, with high gables and overhanging barge-boards, and the casements were of lead with lozenge quarries. There were two rooms on the ground-floor, a sitting-room and a parlour, with a kitchen behind, and other offices; and up-stairs there were four bed-rooms, with their windows peeping out of ivy and clematis under the gables. “Full of sparrows and earwigs,” some of you will say; but Miss Markham never said anything of the kind. If any one asked her about her cottage, which

belonged to Sir Thomas, but which she had restored and made the perfect little abode it was, she always said, "My cottage suits me exactly; and it is a great thing in this troublesome world to be exactly suited. I would not change it for any palace in the world. I hope to die in it, and to be buried up in the graveyard of High Beech Church when my time is come." It had a little garden full of flowers in front, and an orchard on one side, with ugly old apple-trees, which somehow or other always bore a fine crop of fruit, when new sorts, and pyramid pears, and the whole new fangle of fruit utterly failed. Quite behind was a kitchen garden, and a meadow just big enough for one cow; and that was the domain over which Miss Markham was queen.

As for temper and character, Miss Markham was a pattern and example to the neighbourhood. She always had a shilling, and sometimes even half-a-crown to give away; always a book to lend to a neighbour which was worth reading, and always a glass of wine to a sick person among the poor. She never offered any one advice except it were asked of her. In that respect she was like the ghosts, that never speak till they are spoken to; and what is believed of ghosts was true of Miss Markham—what she said was always worth listening to.

So there she spent her life among her books and her flowers at High Beech—a bright sunny spot in that little village. “It always seemed warm at Miss Markham’s,” was what the poor said as they passed by the cottage.

This was the woman of whom, after that hour’s meditation, Mrs. Marjoram resolved to be jealous, and to read Mr. Marjoram a lecture.

“What’s the use of waiting in bed till I am called? I had better get up and speak to him at once.”

To say was to do with Mrs. Marjoram; wasted with jealousy, she was a woman of action. She was out of bed and at the dressing-room door at a quarter-past seven.

The unhappy Marjoram, as we know, had been locked in his dressing-room at an early hour. Mrs. Marjoram thought she had got him quite safe, and that she had only to turn the key and invade her husband in his prison. But she was mistaken; for when Mr. Marjoram had been shut up, he unconsciously imitated the example of his tormentor and shot the bolt on his own side, so that Mrs. Marjoram was bolted out on his side just as he was locked in on hers.

“Mr. Marjoram!” said Mrs. Marjoram, turning

the key and pushing the door all at once, that she might burst in upon her victim with vigour. But as the door refused to open, Mrs. Marjoram recoiled with her own impulse a foot or two into the bedroom, and the awful words “Mr. Marjoram!” returned to her own face.

Whether the unhappy Marjoram felt the push against the door, the turning of the key, and those awful words, no one can tell. At any rate he made no sign.

But Mrs. Marjoram was not to be baffled. Again she advanced to the assault with an energy for which Colonel Barker would have praised her. Again she pushed—no! this time she knocked at the door, and again she called out, perhaps we might say she bawled out—

“Mr. Marjoram!” and when that unhappy man made no sign, she screamed—

“Mr. Marjoram, open the door!”

“I am asleep!” said Mr. Marjoram somewhat incoherently. In fact, he was in such a fright he knew not what he said.

“Nonsense, Mr. Marjoram!” said his wife. “I want to speak to you; open the door.”

Perhaps Mr. Marjoram thought if he did not open the door Mrs. Marjoram, in her wild energy, would

kick it in. Perhaps he thought if he provoked her she would again turn the key, and keep him a close prisoner for the natural term of his visit to High Beech ; in which case he could not have escaped, as the dressing-room in which he was immured had no door of its own, but was of that uncomfortable kind which has to borrow an exit from the adjoining bedroom. True, he might have thrown himself out of window, or crept up the chimney, and so escaped ; but he had not yet made up his mind to turn chimneysweep, or to break his neck in escaping from Mrs. Marjoram, though he was not so very far from it. Mr. Marjoram therefore opened the door.

“ Mr. Marjoram,” said Mrs. Marjoram, “ your conduct is most disgraceful.”

“ I am quite ready to admit it,” said Mr. Marjoram with a penitential air. “ It is a very long time since I smoked a cigar.”

“ Smoked ! It is not smoke that I am talking about, Mr. Marjoram, but of something far worse.”

“ What can it be ? what have I done ?” said Mr. Marjoram with an air of amazement.

“ Mr. Marjoram,” said Mrs. Marjoram, “ you have in one night been guilty of two disgusting practices —inebriety and smoking ; but what you did at

dinner was far worse. I could forgive the two first, but the last is unpardonable."

Here you will of course remark how easy it is to forgive one class of sins when you have made up your mind to find your prisoner guilty of another.

It is very like the second and third counts in an indictment for murder, those for the minor offences of manslaughter and assault, which it is no use pressing when you have convicted your criminal of the capital offence. Had not Miss Markham stood first in Mrs. Marjoram's indictment, she would have been bitter enough against her husband for his venial intemperance. So true it was that her jealousy, like Aaron's rod, had swallowed up all the other rods which she had laid up in pickle for her husband.

"What last? What is unpardonable? I don't at all understand you."

"None so stupid as those that won't understand. Mr. Marjoram, you are like the 'deaf adder' of the Psalmist David, whose example you seem inclined to follow."

It was always remarked by Mrs. Marjoram's friends, that when she was very bitter against her husband she always quoted the Old Testament.

"I am sure I wish I could follow the example of

the Psalmist in everything," said Mr. Marjoram. "It would be better for me."

"Yes," said Mrs. Marjoram, rather hissing like an adder than talking in a human voice. "Yes, in the number of his wives and his behaviour with the wife of Uriah."

"Really, Mrs. Marjoram, I don't understand you."

"Must I then speak out, wicked man?" said Mrs. Marjoram. "Must I proclaim my own disgrace to the world? Must I debase myself to the dust?"

"I say again," said the puzzled Marjoram, "I don't understand any of your allusions to David and Uriah. As for the number of his wives, are you quite sure you are not confounding him with Solomon?"

"Yes, I am," said Mrs. Marjoram. "I mean David and not Solomon, though no doubt you think yourself as wise as that king."

"Well then, speak out," said Mr. Marjoram.

"Shall I whisper her name?" said Mrs. Marjoram. "Really, Mr. Marjoram, you will drive me into hysterics."

"It is you who drive yourself into hysterics with your fancies," said Mr. Marjoram; "but sooner than you should go into hysterics I should prefer to hear the name of the person to whom you allude."

"Can you deny then, guilty man, that your be-

haviour with Miss Markham was most disgraceful yesterday? Though you were so infatuated as not to perceive it, the way you flirted with Miss Markham was the subject of universal remark."

"With Miss Markham!" said Mr. Marjoram, bursting out into a loud laugh; "why, she is at least seventy! I might almost as soon be accused of flirting with my grandmother."

"If you go on in that heartless way, Mr. Marjoram," said his wife, "I really will go into hysterics. You never will understand the fineness of my feelings. As for your grandmother, is there not the example of Ninon de l'Enclos, and ever so many other wicked women, to prove that women may remain sufficiently attractive at an advanced age to lead away silly husbands from the paths of duty and self-respect?"

"It may be all very true about Ninon de l'Enclos," said Mr. Marjoram, "though I must say I wish with all my heart she had never been born to rise up in judgment against innocent husbands. But what I say is, that by no force of imagination can Miss Markham ever be compared to the French lady in question. Why she is, to speak irreverently, as old as the hills and as ugly as sin."

"Do not jest, Mr. Marjoram; this is no jesting

matter. When you joke about the ugliness of sin you do not reflect how very ugly your sin has been.”

“ My sin ? ” said Mr. Marjoram.

“ Let there be no beating about the bush, Mr. Marjoram. You cannot deny that you paid too much attention to Miss Markham yesterday ; and as a proof, Lady Carlton said to me as we left the dining-room, ‘ How much Mr. Marjoram seemed to enjoy himself with Miss Markham ! ’ ”

Having said which, Mrs. Marjoram having sufficiently tormented her husband, and showed the fineness of her feelings, went off into hysterics as a further proof of her sensibility, and Mr. Marjoram had to bring her round by sprinkling her face with cold water. When she was somewhat restored she consoled herself by scratching at his face and pulling out some of his whiskers, like a little baby, and then flew off into her bed-room and locked the door, declaring herself the most injured of women.

And yet, in spite of all this, Mr. Marjoram dearly loved, and would have looked at death or separation from her with extreme dismay.



CHAPTER XVI.

PRAYERS AND BREAKFAST AT HIGH BEECH.

BUT there goes the prayer-gong, and down we all go to prayers. It was a pretty sight to see all those comely maids and well-fed men-servants ranged along the hall, only waiting for the appearance of Sir Thomas Carlton to kneel down and pray.

Punctual to the minute came Sir Thomas, and with him Lady Carlton and her daughters—Alice very lovely and happy-looking, and Florry very handsome, but looking, as her mother said, as though she had been up all night at a ball. Then came Colonel Barker, followed by his faithful wife, who still wanted to know what that dreadful noise was, and not in the least heeding the colonel's winks and hints. Then came Lady Sweetapple, running down like an express train on one side of the staircase, while Harry Fortescue and Edward Vernon shot down the other flight.

It was now two minutes after the quarter, and Sir Thomas was just going to begin, when the gaunt form of Mrs. Marjoram appeared at the top of the staircase, followed closely by her husband. Lady Carlton made her a sign, which quickened her movements; and at last, three minutes and a half after time, prayers began at High Beech on the 2nd of June, 1870.

The prayers were good prayers, not too long, and not too uncharitable and uncompromising. Sir Thomas Carlton was not like that clergyman we could name, who always read the Athanasian Creed to his household every morning, because it was such “a noble specimen of English.” We are very fond of it too, only it must be in moderation. It is like a *pâté de foie gras*. If you eat it every day, it will give you an indigestion; and so it is with the Athanasian Creed, too much of it is very apt to give you a religious surfeit. Somehow or other condemnation and cursing is a bad thing to begin the day with; so morning prayers ought to be full of mercy, love, and peace. The terrors of the Prayer-book should be reserved for other seasons. Assuredly the weakest time of most men is before breakfast; then you may almost knock down a very strong man with a feather.

Prayers over, they all went into the breakfast-room. There was spread a most ample repast. Talk of Scotch breakfasts! We don't deny that they have very famous breakfasts north of the Tweed; but to say that a good English breakfast doesn't equal any Scotch one, is as great a story as to say that the Scotch are a less saving nation than the English, which at any rate we all of us know to be a wicked story. But putting comparisons out of the question, we may say that the breakfast-table at High Beech was loaded with every delicacy of the season; and very happy and very cheerful they all seemed as they sat down to it and looked out over the flower-beds blazing with flowers, and saw the cattle already standing under the thick shadows of the tall trees, in token that the day was as hot as the weather was fine.

By a cunning little arrangement, Florry Carlton had got Harry Fortescue to sit between herself and Alice, and fortune so far favoured her that Lady Sweetapple was seated, not opposite to her, but on the same side of the table, three off. Next to Alice was Edward Vernon, of course. He seemed to drop naturally into the seat by her side, wherever that might be.

But they had hardly begun breakfast when Sir Thomas exclaimed—

"I thought we were not all here; where are Beeswing and Count Pantouffles?"

Alas! these guilty persons had not appeared at prayers. The golden rule of the house was broken, and Sir Thomas was evidently put out.

"I don't so much mind about Pantouffles," he said. "I suppose he would say he is not of our religion, though I am sure I have known Pantouffles of all creeds and countries; but Beeswing knows the rule of the house. He ought not to have missed prayers. I hope he's not ill."

Just at that moment the two truants appeared, almost arm in arm, gliding into their places as though nothing had happened.

There is nothing, however, like taking the bull by the horns, or your host by the collar, and Mr. Beeswing at once "collared" Sir Thomas by saying—

"Perhaps you want to know why I was not at prayers?"

"Certainly, Beeswing," said Sir Thomas, "I should like to know. I don't think you can have been ill, you look so fresh and well."

"Never was better in my life," said Mr. Beeswing; "but I have a very good excuse."

"I should like to hear it," said Sir Thomas.

"Well, just as I was coming down, Pantouffles

came into my room to ask my advice on a knotty point, and it took so long to discuss it that we forgot the time, and so missed prayers. As it was, I peeped over the balustrade and saw you all on your knees, so I thought it better not to disturb you."

"Before I give you absolution, I should like to know the knotty point," said Sir Thomas.

"May I tell it, Pantouffles?" asked Mr. Beeswing.

"Certainly, with all my heart," said Count Pantouffles.

"Well," said Mr. Beeswing, "it was whether he ought to be expected to go down to prayers in an English house, he being a Catholic? So you see we were thinking of prayers—we were with you in the spirit if not in the flesh."

"Why didn't you tell the count," said Lady Sweetapple, "that he was bound to appear, on the principle that when you are at Rome you should do as they do at Rome?"

"I own I thought of that," said Mr. Beeswing; "but as it ran through my mind I saw how dangerous it would be if applied at Rome itself, for it would force all us good Protestants to restore the Inquisition and the Jesuits, and to set up the rack, and the boot, and all the instruments of torture which prevailed in Catholic times."

“And what did the count say—what was his objection?” asked Sir Thomas.

“He said——may I say it, count?”

“Oh yes, say it by all means,” said the count, who looked up from a large plateful of fish.

“He said he would willingly go down to prayers in an English house, only he was afraid of his director.”

“His what?” asked Sir Thomas.

“His director—in other words, of his confessor; who would be more vexed at hearing that he had assisted at any Anglican rites than if he had committed a mortal sin.”

At this period came a great groan across the table from Mrs. Marjoram, who exclaimed directly afterwards—

“What power Satan still has in these isles!”

“Well,” said Sir Thomas, “as you were engaged in a religious discussion you may be forgiven; but I should like to ask the count if he is really so afraid of his confessor?—I beg pardon, I mean of his director?”

“Not afraid of him!—Why, certainly, I am very much afraid of him,” said the count, again looking up from his plate, which was a cold one, filled with a portion of a raised pie. “Of course I am. He has

power to make me very uncomfortable in the next world if I do not listen to what he says in this. No, we Catholics say, 'always be on good terms with your director, and obey him in little things like this, and then, when you go to confess a real sin, he will not be too hard on you.'

There was an absurdity in this statement which made even the unhappy Marjoram burst out into a fit of laughing, for which his wife, who would not let him leave her side, gave him a great kick under the table, just on his broken shin. She was not at all inclined to laugh at such profanity, as she called it, but babbled something about the wretched rags of Rome and the Scarlet Lady, which seemed to give her great internal consolation, but were lost, alas ! to the rest of the company.

"Oh, dear!" said Mr. Marjoram, writhing with pain at this sudden attack.

"What's the matter, Marjoram?" said Colonel Barker. "How are you after your cigar?"

"Colonel Barker," said Mrs. Marjoram with dignity, "pray don't mention that subject."

"Well," said Mrs. Barker, "if you don't like to speak of that, perhaps you will tell us what that dreadful noise in your room was. Something fell down with such a crash that our room shook again."

"You had better ask Mr. Marjoram. He can give you the information which you seek."

"Pray, what was it?" "Mr. Marjoram, do tell us!" "How did it happen?" and half a dozen other questions now ran round the table, all aimed at eliciting the desired information from the unhappy Marjoram, whose position seemed to grow more and more unhappy with every hour that he spent at High Beech.

Now the only person besides Mrs. Marjoram and her husband who really knew what had happened was Colonel Barker, and as it appeared that the only one that had heard the noise was Mrs. Barker, the gallant colonel determined to come to the rescue.

"Well," he said, just as the unhappy Marjoram was going to confess—"well, if you all must know, Mr. Marjoram had nothing to do with it. It was I that made the noise."

"You, Colonel Barker?" said Mrs. Barker. "It was impossible. Why, we heard it together."

"That's because you know nothing of acoustics," said the indomitable colonel. "If you did, you would know that sight travels quicker than sound. After I had seen Mr. Marjoram into his room, I ran along the corridor to reach my room, and in so doing I overbalanced myself, fell forward, and dropped my

candlestick with a dreadful crash. As I fell, I clutched the handle of our door, Mrs. Barker, and, as you thought, came in before the sound ; and so I did, for half a second after I got in the sound followed me and you heard it. It just overtook me as I reached the bedside, and then you fancied you heard it in Mr. Marjoram's room."

"But, Jerry," said Mrs. Barker, "how do you reconcile that with what you said when we heard the noise together last night?"

"I'm sure I can't tell," said Colonel Barker. "If you want information on that you had better ask Mrs. Marjoram, for no one knows better that things often happen overnight which it is quite impossible to reconcile with the stories that are told of them next morning."

At this ridiculous invention of Colonel Barker every one laughed, for they saw that it was only meant to get Mr. Marjoram out of a scrape into which he had unfortunately fallen with Mrs. Marjoram overnight.

Now let us return to our lovers, or would-be lovers. Lady Sweetapple said little or nothing. Her heart—or perhaps we ought to say her head—was full of that third woman, that unknown quantity

in her relations with Harry Fortescue which she was resolved to discover.

Florry was silent too, but rather triumphant. For the moment she was mistress of the position, and felt sure that Harry Fortescue was safe. Alice and Edward chattered on much as they had done the day before. After Mr. Marjoram's rescue by Colonel Barker everything went smooth.

Then came projects for the day. Sir Thomas regretted that he was obliged to run up to town; but then it was well known that he was a man full of business, who could take few holidays. Just at that moment, too, he was much engaged in bringing out a new loan for the Emperor of Timbuctoo, as a guarantee for which his sable majesty was willing to pledge the produce of his Black Diamond Mines for fifty years. Every one in the City wished for a slice of it, and it was at a premium before the stock was issued. Sir Thomas therefore had an additional reason for going to town.

But, as Lady Carlton remarked, he could not take High Beech up to town with him. The park and country round were at the disposal of his visitors.

“ If you will take my advice, you will all go down, under the shade of the lime avenue, to the West

Lodge, and see Miss Markham in her cottage. It is a visit which will well repay you."

Here a black cloud began to gather over Mrs. Marjoram's brow, who spitefully gave the wretched Marjoram another kick under the table on the same sore place.

"Oh, it would be so nice!" said Lady Sweetapple. "She seemed so very pleasant."

For shame on you, Lady Sweetapple! You know you only wished to go because you thought it would be so nice to walk under the lime-tree shade with Harry Fortescue.

"My dear, will you go?" said Colonel Barker.

"Certainly, Colonel Barker, if you wish it," replied Mrs. Barker in her stereotyped phrase.

"Would you like to go, Mrs. Marjoram?" said Lady Carlton.

"I am afraid I have letters to write, and so, I know, has Mr. Marjoram," said the vinegar-cruet.

"As for that," said Mr. Beeswing, "the post does not leave till seven. You will have plenty of time to write your letters in the afternoon."

"Come along, Marjoram!" said Colonel Barker. "You seemed to get on so well with Miss Markham last night."

"Mr. Marjoram is not very well this morning,"

said Mrs. Marjoram. "I really cannot let him go out in the sun. He can read or play at billiards by himself till after luncheon."

Now if there was anything that the unhappy Marjoram would have liked it would have been an easy walk under the shady limes to see the cheery old lady, but at the command of his tyrant he gave it up gracefully, though he got no thanks for yielding.

"After luncheon," said Lady Carlton, "I propose that you should drive to the other end of the park, to King Edward's Oak; and if it is very fine, we might sit on the grass and have five-o'clock tea there."

"That would be so nice!" said Lady Sweetapple, her soft eye sparkling with delight; for here, again, she saw a probability that she might be near to, and perhaps alone with, Harry Fortescue.

"What do you say to it, girls?" asked Lady Carlton turning to her daughters; for like a prudent mother of the present day, she never settled anything without first consulting the rising generation.

"Oh, it would be so nice!" said Florry and Alice together. Florry determined to be a policeman over Harry the whole day, and Alice feeling sure that wherever she might be Edward Vernon would be at her side.

“I don’t think I’ll go,” said Mr. Beeswing. “It strikes me, if so many go, there will be no room for us in Miss Markham’s cottage, which would hurt her feelings. I’ll stay here and play a game at billiards with Marjoram. I say, Marjoram, don’t look so doleful. I’ll play you a game five hundred up, and give you fifty ; will that make you happy ?”

“I shall be very glad to play with you,” said Mr. Marjoram in a listless way.

So it was all settled. Lady Sweetapple, the two sisters, Harry and Edward, and Colonel and Mrs. Barker, were to go and see Miss Markham.

“Bless me !” said Sir Thomas, just as he was rising from his breakfast, “we are always forgetting some one. What will you do, Count Pantouffles ?”

The count, who was still hard at work at his raised pie, to which ever and anon he returned with fresh energy, said—

“This heat intolerable reminds me of Italy. No, I am not an enraged dog, what you call a mad dog. I will stay at home and score the game for Mr. Beeswing and Mr. Marjorian.”

“Not ‘Marjorian,’ count, but ‘Marjoram,’ ” said Mr. Beeswing.

“Very good,” said Count Pantouffles. “I beg your pardon, Mr. Marjoram ; I did not catch your name.”

“It’s not so easy to catch, nor have you caught it yet,” said Mr. Beeswing; “but ‘Marjorum’ is quite near enough to it, and so it is all arranged.”

In a few minutes Sir Thomas was on his way to the station, and all the visitors had left the breakfast-room and dispersed themselves over the house.





CHAPTER XVII.

EVERY MAN HAS HIS PRICE.

WE need hardly say that the smokers gathered together on the terrace, where, in the shade cast by the house, they smoked and talked till it was time to start for Miss Markham's. The chosen band consisted, as before, of Count Pantouffles, Colonel Barker, and Harry and Edward, but of course Mr. Marjoram was not of the party, though Harry called out to him from the terrace, when he saw his rueful face peeping out of the drawing-room windows, to come down and try another hair of the dog that bit him.

“If you go,” said Mrs. Marjoram, who, unseen, stood close by him, “I shall fall into hysterics.”

“Pray don't think of doing any such thing,” said Mr. Marjoram; “I assure you I have not the least intention of smoking again.”

By this time Lady Sweetapple had flown up-stairs to her room, just to see if Mrs. Crump had found

out for her that little piece of information. How curious women are! you say. Yes; but not more curious than men, who for a choice are worse gossips when they take to gossiping than women. But let us drop that question, and hear what Mrs. Crump has to say.

“Now, Crump,” said her mistress, “have you found that out?”

“No, indeed, my lady, I have not. Mr. Beeswing’s gentleman is very difficult to coax. He is a Frenchman, my lady, and says he has had too many good fortunes with ladies to tell other gentlemen’s secrets. I’ve done all I can without demeaning myself to get it out of him, but he says every man has his price, and he won’t let it out till he has got what he wants.”

“And what’s that, pray?” asked Lady Sweetapple.

“Oh, my lady, I really daren’t tell,” said Mrs. Crump, blushing up as red as her own cherry-coloured ribbons.

“What nonsense, Crump!” said her ladyship. “A woman of experience, and at your age; you ought to have got the secret out of this Frenchman long ago, if you had been clever.”

“Oh, my lady, I’m not so clever as you, I know,” said Mrs. Crump, with a curtsey; “but I am quite

sure your ladyship would never pay any one else the price which this Frenchman wishes me to pay for yours."

"But did he say anything more about it—about the lady, I mean?"

"Yes, my lady, he said a great deal; and so far as I can make out, Mr. Fortescue is as good as engaged to a young lady up in town, only Mr. Beeswing's gentleman says he is bound in honour not to tell her name."

"Bound in honour! bound in fiddlesticks!" said Lady Sweetapple. "See, Crump, here are five sovereigns; just try whether your French admirer is proof against that bribe."

"Very good, my lady," said Crump; "but you must know the price he wanted me to pay was not at all a money price, my lady."

"Don't talk nonsense," said Lady Sweetapple. "Time is precious; go as fast as you can, and find out the lady's name."

So there she sat at the open window, looking out across the noble park, with its green, sturdy, wide-spreading oaks and beeches, all across its brown heath and fresh green brackens, but never heeding them one bit, no more than if they were the dustiest expanse of London pavement.

“I feel rather sick at heart,” said Lady Sweetapple, as she heard Mrs. Crump puffing up the spiral staircase which led down to the offices out of that worthy abigail’s room.

“Have you go it?”

“Yes, my lady,” said Crump, her face red with excitement, and her cap very much awry; “but what do you think that nasty Frenchman did; he takes your ladyship’s sovereigns and puts them into his pocket, and then he took, besides, what he had before asked me to give; for all at once, unbeknown to any one, which it was me, he threw his arms round my neck, and gave me such a kiss, all smelling of garlic and onions. ‘That is what I call being paid twice over,’ I said, ‘for the same thing;’ and I could have clawed his eyes out. But he only smiled, and said it was all the fortune of war; and then he took out a pencil and wrote the lady’s name on a piece of paper, and here it is.”

So saying, she produced a dirty piece of paper, on which was scrawled, in a French hand, “Miss Edith Price, —, Luper Street.”

“That, my lady,” said Mrs. Crump, who by this time had rearranged her head-dress, “is the name of the young lady to whom Mr. Fortescue is as good as engaged.”

“Edith Price—Edith Price?” said Lady Sweetapple. “I never heard of her before.”

“No! nor no one else respectable like,” said Mrs. Crump, who was still very excited. “Some low-lived young person, I daresay. Besides, who can tell if this Frenchman, who first takes your sovereigns, and then steals a kiss from me like that, is not a wicked storyteller, after all, and that he has made up Miss Edith Price out of his own head. You know, my lady, he said he had his price, and I have no doubt it is this Miss Edith Price.”

Anxious as she was to get at the bottom of the affair, Lady Sweetapple could not help laughing at the volubility and vexation of Mrs. Crump at being so cheated by the Frenchman; but as it was not safe to soliloquise in Mrs. Crump’s presence, she dismissed her with a warning not to venture too near the Frenchman’s clutches for the future; an injunction from which Mrs. Crump declared nothing would ever induce her to depart.

When Mrs. Crump was gone, Lady Sweetapple threw herself into an easy-chair and began to soliloquise.

Have you, any of you, remarked how it eases one’s mind to say things out loud when no one is listening? Our thoughts seem to take so much more shape when

we clothe them in words. They seem to become alive and awake, instead of dead and sleeping. So, at least, thought Lady Sweetapple, and she began to think out loud. It is a dangerous habit, and in after-life leads to all sorts of absurdities, when habit makes out-loud thinkers think out loud when they are not alone, like the immortal Nubley in Theodore Hook's novel; but when we are young, and not absent, we may think out loud with impunity. These were Lady Sweetapple's outspoken thoughts—

“‘Edith Price?’ That's what the vulgar Frenchman who took that liberty with poor Crump meant by saying that every man had his price. I don't think I ever heard of any one named Price before. I wonder where Mr. Fortescue found her? As for marrying him, I don't believe a word of it. He is not the man to marry any one who lives in Lupus Street—a street on the very outer fringe of society and civilisation. I passed through it once, going to the Crystal Palace. I am sure, too, I never saw any man less like a man in love. I don't think he's in love with any one. I wish I did. I think I know some one who could be in love with him. There are two or three in love with him perhaps; two at least, I should say. I must see if I can make any use of this name that I have got. I will try the

effect of mentioning her in the course of the day. If he shows any alarm at hearing the name 'Price,' it will be some proof that he cares for her."

Then came a minute or two during which the fair Amicia, or Amice, as she ought to have been called in good old English fashion, ceased to think out loud, and remained reclining in that easy-chair with her soft eyes staring into space, and a sweet smile on her lips, as though she were deep in ecstatic visions. Then she began again—

"It must be time to go to see Miss Markham. Dear, cheery old thing she seemed. But I am afraid I should never have done for an old maid. However, if I cared to be one, I can't in the nature of things be one now. That's a comfort!"

Lady Sweetapple now summoned Mrs. Crump, who helped her to put on the prettiest walking costume possible. That mountain of luggage had not been dragged over to High Beech for nothing. No one can tell, except Mrs. Crump, how many dresses Lady Sweetapple brought with her to High Beech. In fact, her life was almost like that of an actor who sustains many parts in one piece—she was always changing her dresses; and though she effected her transformations very quickly by the aid of Mrs. Crump, still the time she lost in these

changes in the course of the year must have been enormous.

There was this difference, however, between Lady Sweetapple and some other people who are always dressing and undressing — all her transformations were most effective. You might say that Lady Sweetapple looked better in one costume than in another. That is only an accident, to which every wearer of dress is liable. No doubt from that first toilette of Eve's in Eden there have been a variety of opinions as to whether this or that dress becomes such and such a woman. Adam may possibly, and, for that matter, Eve herself, have thought her new style of dress very unbecoming ; but then it must be remembered that the fig-leaves were only a makeshift, and that there were no dressmakers then in existence, and in all probability Adam stitched Eve's first dress with the thorn of the yucca or Adam's needle.

But whatever Lady Sweetapple wore was sure to be becoming. On the 2nd of June, 1870, she wore the sweetest short-skirted dress, looped up just a little on one side ; for she was well-made, you know, and her feet and ankles were unexceptionable. Even when she set her foot to the ground you might have seen that she was a determined character ; she put it down so quietly, and yet so firmly. You could see at

once that she was a woman who would never retrace her steps, and if she had ever committed an actual murder with her hands—with her eyes and her countenance, *nimium lubricus aspici*, she had slain many men, most of whom she had, however, restored to life with a smile—if she had ever committed a real murder in wet weather, any detective would have sworn to her by her footsteps, not so much from their size or shape as by the determination with which she trod the earth, and the strength of character which she showed even in her footprints. On her head she wore the loveliest little hat with an ostrich feather curled round it, and a little marabout tuft or crest, or aigrette, or whatever else milliners call it, perched up in front. It was not one of those great sprawling hats, covered with beetles and creeping things, surmounted by a humming-bird sitting on its eggs in a nest. No, it was not an aviary or a beetlery, but a hat. It was not very high. It did not go up into a peak or a dome, like one of the Alps or Pyrenees. It was not built upon a huge substruction of hair and tow, or false hair, to give the wearer additional height. No, it was not a mountain, or something designed to add another cubit to a woman's stature, in direct contradiction of the gospel utterance. It was a hat, and

the loveliest little hat possible, resting naturally on natural hair, and that natural hair Lady Sweetapple's. We really must add one word on her boots. They had no heels. "What! positively no heels?" Well, very little heel, then; only as much as would keep the feet level, and at the same time preserve the natural arch which Providence has placed under every well-made instep. Perhaps none of you know that you are all built on arches, and when people babble about the first inventor of the arch, whether it were the Egyptians, or the Assyrians, or the Scythians, they talk the greatest nonsense; for the first inventor of the arch was the Supreme Maker of man, who, when he created Adam, that perfect pattern of a man, made him stand on two arches, one under each instep. To return to Lady Sweetapple. She had far too much respect for Providence and her own feet to fly in its face by giving way to the insane fashion which makes young ladies wear heels two or three, or perhaps four, inches high. It has been now ascertained that the fashion was first invented by an eminent chiropodist and debunniionizer at the court of the Emperor of *Cornucopia*—look out that empire in any geographical treatise, and, when you have found it, rest from your labours for a week. That eminent practitioner found

his trade was going to the dogs. He reflected that if chiropodists were to live, some people must have deformed feet; but their feet would never be deformed unless they wore tight shoes, and as long as they put their feet down evenly to the ground. He saw, further, that tight shoes and bandaging the feet had been carried to an art in the neighbouring empire of China, which is the nearest empire to Cornucopia; but though he might have introduced the same system into Cornucopia, he scorned to imitate, and after several sleepless nights he resolved to recommend the wearing of high heels to all his employers. It so happened that the Empress of Cornucopia was very short and very fat. She certainly made a figure in the world, but it was not by her height. To her this wily court chiropodist addressed himself, and persuaded her majesty not only to wear high heels herself, but to make all her ladies wear them. His device entirely succeeded. In less than a year every woman in the empire of Cornucopia wore high heels, except those pariahs of society who had no shoes or boots to wear. That was what fashion did for our chiropodist. But he was not content with fashion. He procured an ukase—for there are ukases in Cornucopia just as there are in Russia—that no lady should come to

court unless she wore high heels. His fortune was thus established, both by the rules of fashion and the law of the land. At first some of the women grumbled—their husbands always grumbled; but what is a grumbling husband worth? Certainly not worth listening to. But even though some of the ladies fell down-stairs and broke their legs, and, in the case of one very fat lady, her neck also; and though they all went about the streets with sticks in their hands, or with stick-umbrellas; and though they almost all limped and halted, and could scarce walk over a mile of ground without suffering cruel agonies, and though their pretty feet, being thrown forward by these high heels, became broad and splayed out, and though—we blush to write it—they were fearfully tortured with corns and bunions; though all the joints in their feet were distorted, and that beautiful natural arch on which they used to stand on each foot was quite broken up and destroyed—in spite of all this they have gone on wearing high heels ever since; for was it not the will of the Empress of Cornucopia, who had set the fashion in this respect?

As for the wily chiropodist, he chuckled when he saw how completely his plan had succeeded. He took a new house, and spent the day in driving

about in consultation with other chiropodists. In the capital of *Cornucopia*, St. Bunnionsburg, there are now twenty chiropodists and debunnionizers for one ten years ago; and what is worse, because it affects us most, this absurd custom has spread to England, and in a little while we shall see all the young ladies in the land tottering about with their toes on the ground and their heels in the air.

From this delusion Lady Sweetapple was spared. She had a very good rule: she only followed the fashion when she thought it suited her looks. In other words, she was a fashion to herself, and a dangerous heretic against its creed—a freethinker in fashion; and if all the chiropodists and dress-makers, who follow the fashion as rigidly as the Scribes and Pharisees of old, could have had their way, they would have burned Lady Sweetapple on a pile made of high heels and old crinolines; only, fortunately, this is a free country, and they could not have their way.

But we cannot stay up-stairs all day seeing Lady Sweetapple dress. It is not proper; and so we will say no more than that she came down most bewitchingly attired, about twelve o'clock, for that was the hour at which the walking-party was to start.

In the hall she found Alice Carlton and Edward—

the inseparables hitherto of our story. Florry was in the conservatory, picking a bouquet for Miss Markham ; and Harry Fortescue was reading the debate in the library. Colonel and Mrs. Barker were walking up and down on the terrace, with the regularity of sentries—she wrapt up as usual in him, and he vouchsafing the remark that he had never felt such heat, not even “in the Runn of Cutch, in our famous march to overtake the Ram Chowdah, when——”

“ Jerry, dear,” said his wife meekly, “ I am afraid there’s not time enough for that story ; it’s past twelve.”

“ Very true, my dear,” said Colonel Barker, looking at his watch. “ I had no idea it was so late ; time goes so quickly with you.”

“ La, Jerry ! don’t say anything of the kind. I’m such an old woman ! ”

“ None the worse for that,” said Colonel Barker, rather sternly for him. “ I’m an old man, if you like ; but as for you, I don’t call you old at all.”

“ Well, at any rate, we are both older than we were at the last census—that you’ll allow.”

“ Of course I will,” said Colonel Barker ; “ but if I lived through twenty censuses I should never find a wife more to my mind than you.”

“Now then, Colonel Barker,” called Edward out of one of the drawing-room windows. “We’re all waiting for you. You can’t go by the terrace; the lime-tree avenue is on the other side of the house.”

“Coming directly,” said Colonel Barker, whose romantic attentions and speeches to Mrs. Barker were thus interrupted.

“Jerry, dear,” said Mrs. Barker, “you know I believe every word you say.”

“I hope you do,” said Colonel Barker, again growing rather stern. “I hope, too, we are neither of us going to begin to tell lies now that we are not so young as we were.”

“Why should we, Jerry?” said Mrs. Barker.

“Oh, you may well ask, ‘Why should we?’” said Colonel Barker oracularly; and then he stopped, for by this time they had joined the others, and it was a law of Colonel Barker’s nature that he would not be sentimental even to his wife in company. His was that noble nature that felt it was no more possible to make love in the presence of others than it is for a woman to be in love with three people all at once.

“Here you are at last,” said Harry Fortescue. “We have been waiting ever so long for you both.”

"Don't believe him, Colonel Barker," said Edward Vernon. "He was not here himself a minute ago. The fact is he has turned politician."

So off they went across the court, at the back of the hall, and then turning through a side gate they were at once in a noble lime avenue, which was more than half a mile in length, under the shade of which they could walk protected from the sun almost all the way to Miss Markham's cottage.

But as they crossed the court—Lady Sweetapple attired as one of the lilies of the field, and Florry and Alice also in very becoming though not so elaborate costumes—they were seen by other persons from the house.

"There they go: four happy young things, and two as happy old ones. How delightful it is to see an elderly couple so fond of one another as Colonel and Mrs. Barker!" This was said by Lady Carlton, who caught sight of them from one of the upper windows. Then, as her thoughts turned to her own children, she said to herself—not out loud, as Lady Sweetapple had spoken her thoughts—"I wonder if Mr. Fortescue and Mr. Vernon know how very well off my girls will be. They are both very nice young men."

At the same moment Mr. and Mrs. Marjoram

were surveying the walking-party from the windows of the library which looked on the court.

“There they go!” said the latter with her usual asperity. “The votaries of fashion and frivolity, Mr. Marjoram. Such is life too often, even in the case of the old,—a mockery, a delusion, and a snare.”

We know these last words are a quotation, and rather a hackneyed one; but seeing how much there is of such false coin passing in all directions, some of our characters would never speak at all, any more than some living personages, if they were never to speak but when they said something original.

“Indeed, my dear,” said Mr. Marjoram, who, after losing two games at billiards to Mr. Beeswing, had recovered his equilibrium, “I do not see what folly and frivolity there is in taking a short walk in the month of June.”

“Mr. Marjoram,” said Mrs. Marjoram, “after your conduct of last night, I desire that you will never again call me ‘my dear.’”

“If you speak in that way,” said Mr. Marjoram, “I shall wish that I had not given up my intention of going with them. I only stayed at home, as you know, to please you.”

“If you continue to insult me, Mr. Marjoram, I shall at once leave the room. No doubt your heart

is burning to see that lady on whom you lavished so much attention last night ; but you need not parade your disgrace.”

“ My disgrace ! What disgrace ? I am sure I do not know what you mean.”

“ That is often the case with the hardened sinner. Read what Bishop Butler says in his sermons about habits.”

“ I am sure I wish I knew an amusing and improving book to read this hot day,” said Mr. Marjoram, anxious to turn the conversation, which was getting beyond his depth. When Mrs. Marjoram began to talk of Butler’s “ Sermons ” or Hooker’s “ Ecclesiastical Polity,” Mr. Marjoram knew that she was in a dangerous state of mind, and not to be trifled with. It was—just as much as when you see a bull with a ring in his nose, or a cow with tips to her horns—a warning that you are not to go too near to them.

“ Mr. Marjoram,” said Mrs. Marjoram solemnly, “ do you really wish to read an improving book ? I say nothing about ‘ amusing,’ for I have long ceased to find any amusement in life, as you well know, and for what reasons. But if you ask for an improving book, take down the ‘ Homilies ’ from that shelf. The third volume on the second shelf.”

Then, as Mr. Marjoram, with a groan, handed her the volume mechanically, she went on—

“Here, read this homily on ‘Gluttony and Drunkenness,’ and lay the lessons it contains to your heart, after those lesser vices which you also exhibited last night.”

“I have read it often before at your advice,” said Mr. Marjoram submissively; “but though you have often said that particular homily just suited my case, I can safely say I never found anything in it which seemed to refer to me or my habits.”

“That is often the case, Mr. Marjoram. I say now, as I have said a thousand times before, ‘None so blind as those that won’t see.’”

“Except those that can’t,” said Mr. Marjoram, tortured into a slight coruscation of wit, and then continuing—“at any rate there’s nothing in that homily against smoking.”

“That only shows how much more wicked the world has grown since that book was written. Tobacco, one of the greatest pests of this age, was not then discovered. If it had existed in Europe, it would have been classed with other kinds of intemperance, and denounced. But this only proves that you, like all the rest of the world, except the salt of the earth, have become more wicked and

depraved than the good and holy man who wrote that book conceived could ever be the case. Your remark, therefore, about tobacco is very flippant and uncalled for. Of course tobacco is included, though not in name, in other classes of intemperance. But I shall retire to my room till luncheon, and in the meantime I hope you will meditate on my words."

"This is rather overdoing it," said the meek Mr. Marjoram, after turning over the leaves of the homily. "I really do not feel as if I were in the habit of over-eating myself and over-drinking myself every day. I am sure I am not. I know, very often, if it wern't for the club, I shouldn't get enough to eat. Mrs. Marjoram cares so little for eating herself, and really lives on so little, that she does not sometimes consider that if men work they must eat and drink. No, I am not, thank heaven ! either a glutton or a drunkard; and as for tobacco, with my headache, I think it will be a very long time before I smoke another cigar."

With these words he carefully restored the volume to its place on the shelf, threw himself into an easy-chair, and pretended to read a book of African travels; but long before the adventurous voyagers had eaten their first bowl of couscousoo, or slaughtered their

first kid, and before they had noted down in their vocabulary one single African word, Mr. Marjoram was fast asleep, quite out of the world of persecution and homilies, whether oral or written, in the land of Nod, where there is really so much comfort and consolation for spirits tormented in what is so often this very hell upon earth.

He had not slept, as he thought, no, not five minutes, or five seconds, when he was awakened by the gong for luncheon. He had been asleep an hour and a half, and yet it seemed as though he had not had those proverbial forty winks which some of us are so fond of taking after dinner.





CHAPTER XVIII.

THE WALKING-PARTY TO MISS MARKHAM'S.

BUT what became of the walking-party while Mrs. Marjoram was lecturing her husband and preparing him for a sweet slumber?

As soon as they got under the shade of the limes, Lady Sweetapple made an attempt to rush off with the lead, as they say when horses start on the turf. She tried to carry off Harry Fortescue, for she was full of Edith Price, and wished to have it out with him then and there. But she was not to have her way. To use a phrase coming from the same green sward, Harry Fortescue was nursed and waited on by Florry Carlton; and not by Florry alone, but by Alice, and, unconsciously, by Edward Vernon. The sisters had made an agreement while they were putting on their hats—though they were not quite so long about their toilette as Lady Sweetapple—that they would keep together on the walk, and

that the “common enemy”—as Florry called Lady Sweetapple—should not have an opportunity of being alone with Harry Fortescue if they could help it.

“You keep close to me, darling,” said Florry to Alice; “I will keep close to Harry,”—for she had now begun to call him “Harry;” “Edward will of course keep close to you; and so we three shall be more than a match for her. The worst of it is, Harry is so innocent. He is just like a lamb gambolling about before the butcher who is going to cut its throat in five minutes.”

“I don’t think she looks very much like a butcher,” said Alice.

“Yes, she does,” said Florry violently; “don’t contradict me, I can’t bear it. What’s the difference between a woman who breaks other girls’ hearts and carries off their friends, and a butcher who cuts poor little innocent lambs’ throats?”

“I really don’t see,” said Alice, “that it has got so far as carrying off or anything of the kind. If there’s any lamb in the party it is Edward, who does follow me about just as if he were led by a string. Do you know, Florry, it is so nice to lead about a young man as though he were a pet lamb.”

It was necessary to repeat so much of the young

ladies' conversation to understand their tactics in the avenue. Lady Sweetapple, as we have said, tried to lead Harry away ; but, somehow or other, the more she tried to have him all to herself, the more the others followed and thwarted her. Alice came up to her on one side, full of admiration at her beautiful dress, and of course Edward was on the other side of Alice. If she bade Harry go and fetch her a wild flower, Florry was at hand to find it with him. Nay, even the gallant Colonel Barker for a moment quitted his wife's side to pay Lady Sweetapple little attentions. There was no help for it. Like all the rest of the world in like circumstances, Amicia had to smile and bear it, and the end of the avenue was reached without her having had one opportunity to speak alone to Harry Fortescue.

Miss Markham's cottage was, as you know, just outside one of the gates of the park. You could see its smoke rising above the gables under the tall elms as you stood by the lodge. But at the lodge the lime-tree shade ceased, and there were two or three hundred yards of dusty road without shade, which looked a perfect Sahara when compared with the grass under the limes, to be traversed before the party could reach the cottage. There they stood for a minute or two, afraid to take a plunge into the

sunshine. Up went parasols and umbrellas, and as Lady Sweetapple was putting up her little umbrella, which she had bought the winter before in the *Passage des Panoramas* at Paris as a perfect *paraphuie de luxe*, and while Florry and Alice were still putting up theirs, Amicia took the occasion to catch Harry's head under the shade of her umbrella and to say—

“ Do you think, Mr. Fortescue, that every man has his price ?”

She thought that this little allusion would have gone home to Harry's heart, and that he would have shown some emotion or surprise. But Harry Fortescue was evidently only puzzled at the suddenness of the question, which seemed aimed at nothing ; but in a moment he answered with a laugh—

“ Of course I do. Every man has his price ; and as for myself, I put my own very high.”

There was no time for more. By this time Florry had made a flank movement with her parasol, and one of its points had got entangled in Harry's shirt-collar, much in the same way as when you sit on a wet day outside a coach next an old gentleman who carries one of those nuisances called an umbrella, one of the points is sure to get inside your collar and conduct a stream of water down your neck.”

"Oh, Mr. Fortune, I beg your pardon!" she cried. "I really did not mean to touch you with my parasol."

"What a forward young lady!" thought Lady Sweetapple.

"What a designing, artful widow!" thought Florry.

Here Colonel Barker, who considered himself the leader of the party, having surveyed the approach to Miss Markham's cottage, had made up his mind that they would never reach it unless they made the attempt.

"It's quite as hot as India, and the sun beats down on my head through my umbrella very like the day when the Ram Chowdah——"

"Anything but that story," said Harry to Lady Sweetapple and Florry at once; for the two rivals were now on either side of him. "Anything but that. I'd sooner brave the dangers of sunstroke than hear the whole story of the Ram Chowdah from beginning to end. I think we had better make a dash across the open and take Miss Markham by storm."

Suiting the action to the word, he ran at full speed along the dusty road; and Lady Sweetapple ran, and Florry ran as fast as Lady Sweetapple, for she was

afraid that Harry would be left alone with her enemy. Then Edward and Alice, who had been sitting on a bank under the cool shade, jumped up and ran too, like mad things; and, last of all, Colonel and Mrs. Barker ran also, in a measured stately manner, bringing up the rear at a slow trot, while the five young ones scampered along, so close that you might have covered them with a sheet.

Miss Markham had already discovered them from the battlements of her castle—that is to say, from the casements of her cottage—and had come down to meet them at her garden-gate. There she stood, with her big gingham umbrella, in her woollen gown, with her great gardening-gloves on her hands, her face all wrinkles, and her eyes and mouth all smiles and sunshine.

As she saw the race run under her eyes, she clapped her hands with glee and called out—

“ Well run, Lady Sweetapple! Well run, Mr. Fortescue!” Then, as Amicia made her effort, as they say in the sporting papers, but just failed in getting on even terms with her competitor, who ran longest, Miss Markham went on—“ Won by a neck by Fortescue, Sweetapple and Florry ran a dead heat for second, Alice third, and Edward fourth. All these

have passed the chair and been placed by the judges. The Colonel and Mrs. Barker beaten off. And now, how are you all, and where is Mr. Marjoram?"

"Oh," said Harry, who was out of breath, but better able to speak than any of the others, "Mrs. Marjoram would not let him come, so he had to stay behind."

"I am sorry," said Miss Markham; "I found him so very pleasant yesterday. But come in and sit down. It is not a long walk, but I daresay you are all tired, the day is so warm."

Here again Colonel Barker would have told some of his Indian experiences, and the Ram Chowdah would have been conjured up from the grave of his forefathers, had not Harry proposed that they should go into the kitchen-garden and eat some strawberries. Now if he had been Mrs. Marjoram's husband, she would probably have called him a greedy pig, and made him read the homily which she had recommended to Mr. Marjoram; but we will not call him by that name, nor, we hope, will our readers who reflect how natural it is to young people to eat strawberries, especially if they can get them on the 2nd of June. We say this, because we know it is not common to find strawberries ripe in the open air so early in June; but all we can say is, that if they were ripe

nowhere else, they were ripe in Miss Markham's garden on that day in 1870.

"Strawberries in the open air? how delightful!" said Lady Sweetapple. "Do let us have some."

"I don't think we have had any but forced ones yet," said Florry; "but then, dear Miss Markham, you always beat us up at the Hall in all kinds of fruit and vegetables."

"We are more sheltered down here," said Miss Markham; and then she added with an air of triumph, "but then you know I am my own mistress, and also my own gardener to a great extent; and where the master's eye and the gardener's eye meet in one head it makes a great difference in your fruit."

"One thing I'm sure of," said Alice. "There never was such a good-tempered gardener as Miss Markham. As for Mr. Andrews, our gardener, if we ask for a flower or a cutting he looks as black as death. I really think, by the way he talks of 'his' bulbs, and 'his' flowers, and 'his' fruit, and 'his' grapes, that he fancies all the garden and its produce belong to him, and not to papa."

"Very true," said Florry; "and I say there never was such a sweet-tempered mistress as Miss Markham; and if all masters were half as nice, there

would be many more pleasant people in the world."

"Stop, stop!" said Miss Markham. "Don't blow my trumpet so loudly; it makes me deaf. It is very easy to be good-tempered when one lives alone with one's dogs and one's birds, and has no one to quarrel with but oneself. Perhaps if I was tried as much as the rest of the world, I should be the worst-tempered woman in it. And now let us go and look for those strawberries."

Then she took down the key of the kitchen-garden gate from its nail, called "Mop," her skye-terrier, who turned at once from what seemed to be a rug in the corner into a living dog, wagging his tail to every one, and led the way for her visitors. They had to pass through the kitchen and the yard, for that was the shortest, if not the only way; but that kitchen was a sight in itself, with all its pots and pans so clean and bright; its dishes and its dressers so tidy; its floor so neatly sanded; its fire so bright and cheery, though it was June, with a joint roasting before it for Miss Markham's early dinner. Nor was the yard a bit behind the kitchen. It was not, as yards often are, the abode of all rubbish and untidiness. There was no mess or litter. It was so clean swept and weeded that it was a joy to see.

Even the pump—that ugly object in most yards—seemed to smile at them as they passed it; and as Alice said she was very thirsty, Edward ran and pumped away till the water came out in a great gush, and then Alice caught some of it in her hand, and drank it, laughing loud as the stream of water splashed into her face and up her nostrils.

“What fun!” said Alice. “How nice the fresh water is!”

If there had been any inspector of waterworks there, he would probably have lectured the party on the danger of drinking water from an unknown and uncertified pump. If they had all been dying of thirst, ay, even in the great desert of Gobi, he would have forbidden any of them to taste a drop under a penalty of five pounds, at least till he could take a sealed bottle of that water up to town, and have it certificated as good and wholesome. It would never have occurred to him that half the pleasure of any pleasurable act consists in its being done on the spur of the moment; and Alice Carlton would no more have called out, “What fun!” if he had brought her a bottle of the same water duly certificated six months afterwards; nay, perhaps—especially if she were not at all thirsty, on a December day, and Edward not by her side to pump it

up—she would have said, “Take it away, nasty stuff. I never can bear to drink cold water.”

Fortunately there was no inspector of sanitary nuisances, or any other nuisance, present, so they all laughed as loud as Alice, and all passed into the kitchen-garden as soon as Miss Markham had unlocked the gate.

“Oh, what a darling little garden!” said Lady Sweetapple. “What nice gravelled walks, with such red gravel! What beautiful cherry-trees and pear-trees! What even rows of peas and beans, and what lovely strawberries!”

Yes, true; they were the most beautiful show of fruit, half hid among the leaves, and more than enough for the whole party if it had been twice as numerous.

“Now then, start fair,” said Harry. “Every one for himself, and the strawberries for us all. If any one is caught doing anything else but pick for himself or herself, be it man or woman, he or she sha’n’t be allowed to eat any more.”

With these words he stooped down, and the rest followed his example. His fingers and mouth were soon as red as Aurora when she rises on a summer day; and there dear old Miss Markham stood, her face glowing with delight at the havoc which was being made in her strawberries.

Colonel and Mrs. Barker were not so destructive as the others, and soon left off. The colonel had an Indian notion that strawberries would give him the gout, and lie heavy on the pit of the stomach; and he confided this fact to Miss Markham, who only laughed at him. But to Mrs. Barker the colonel's words were law, so she left off as soon as she heard he thought them unwholesome.

But even in that hour of apprehended indigestion the colonel's natural gallantry shone out.

“How very good of you, Miss Markham, to stand by while we devour your strawberries. It is not every one who would look on quietly while such a greedy horde passed over their property.”

“As for that,” said Miss Markham, “there is no pleasure in life equal to looking on while other people enjoy themselves. I do so like to see all ages taking their pleasure, but I delight in nothing so as to see young people enjoy themselves as young people only can. Take this very strawberry gathering: a very few suffice for my wants, and it would be very greedy in me to gobble them up before Mr. Fortescue; but it seems to come quite natural to him and Mr. Vernon, and the three ladies, to eat as many as ever they can.”

“I am afraid they will leave none for yourself—

none for preserving," said the thrifty Mrs. Barker.
"What nice jam they would make!"

"So they will," said Miss Markham, using the future tense; "so they will. If you come to-morrow morning, you will find just as many ripe ones as there were this morning. That's the worst of strawberries; if they would only last a little longer it would be so nice; but, like so many other pleasures, they come in with a burst and a rush, and then there is a glut of them, and we are sick of them, and that's the end of the strawberry season, and they are all gone till next year."

By this time the young people, as Miss Markham called them, had almost finished their feast.

"How very greedy we have been!" said Florry, holding up her rosy fingers.

"I'm almost ashamed to look Miss Markham in the face," said Alice.

"Nonsense," said Harry; "I'm sure she is more pleased at our eating them than if she had eaten them herself."

"I quite agree with you," said Edward, stooping down to pluck one more "beauty" for Alice.

"This is what I call strawberry eating in perfection," said Lady Sweetapple.

"I am sure you are all heartily welcome," said

Miss Markham, as they left the strawberry beds, "and I am only sorry there is nothing else in the garden ready for you."

So with many thanks, and even kisses on the part of Florry and Alice, they again passed through the yard and the kitchen, and stood again in the little sitting-room, which was the picture of neatness and order.

"Dear Miss Markham," said Florry, "I had almost forgotten it, but mamma hopes you will come up and dine at the Hall to-night; and if you like we will send the brougham for you."

"No, thank you kindly," said the sturdy little dame. "If I come I will come in my own way, and on my own feet, just as I always come."

"But you will come?" said Alice. "Say you will come."

"Will there be room for me two days running?" said Miss Markham doubtfully.

"Of course there is always room for you," said Florry impatiently. "There are many people whom we would far more willingly spare than you."

"Who are coming?" asked Miss Markham with laudable curiosity.

"Let me think," said Florry. "There are only

Lord and Lady Pennyroyal, Mr. and Mrs. Rubrick, yourself, and Herr Sonderling, our German recluse, besides the party you met yesterday.”

“I thought Herr Sonderling never went out?” pursued Miss Markham.

“Oh yes; but latterly we have persuaded him to come to us, and at any rate he is coming to-night. Now do say you will come.”

Now, had Florry Carlton been as busy watching Lady Sweetapple as she was in chatting to Miss Markham, she would have seen a cloud pass over her rival’s face when she heard the name of Sonderling. No doubt Sonderling is a strange name—a very strange name. It means “strange,” we find, when translated into English; but that was no reason why Lady Sweetapple should turn pale when she heard it, still less that she should whisper to Alice that she felt faint, and would like to go out of doors.

“It is nothing,” she said; “it will soon pass off,” as she leant on Alice, passing out into the open air.

“All a pretence,” said Florry to herself as she followed. “It is easy to see her intention.”

But, after all, it was real and not feigned faintness; and as soon as she got out into the open air,

Lady Sweetapple would have fallen and swooned away, had not Harry Fortescue caught her in his arms and laid her gently down flat on her back on the grass.

All this happened in a moment, and Lady Sweetapple never in fact quite swooned away. She soon came to herself, and was already much better when dear Miss Markham stood at her side, with a bottle of salts, some burnt feathers, and a jug of water fresh from that pump which Edward had so cleverly handled on behalf of Alice.

“Bless me, dear heart!” said the little old lady, “you gave me quite a turn. Won’t you go up-stairs and lie on the sofa a while till you feel better.”

“A thousand thanks!” said Lady Sweetapple, in a voice still softer by weakness. “I shall be very well now if you will only give me a little water to drink.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to have some brandy in it?” said Mrs. Barker. “Jerry, dear, don’t you think some brandy would do Lady Sweetapple good?”

“I am sure I can’t tell. I always would have brandy in the water if I felt faint; but, then, I never felt faint in my life; not even when the Ram Chowdah——”

But he was not to be allowed to finish or even begin that famous story.

“I think, instead of telling stories,” said Harry Fortescue, “we had better get Lady Sweetapple home as quickly as we can. I tell you what we will do: she must sit in a chair, and I and Edward will carry her along that sunny bit of road till we get her safe under the shade of the limes.”

“A very good idea,” said Colonel Barker. “I remember carrying one of my own men so, who had sunstroke in India.”

So the chair was got; and though Florry would have protested if she dared, it would have looked so inhuman, Lady Sweetapple was placed in it, and Harry and Edward carried her along the road, while Alice held her umbrella over her head to keep off the sun.

Dear Miss Markham accompanied her to the gate, and they parted with many kind words. As for Florry and Colonel Barker and his wife, they formed the guard of honour round my lady’s palankin, as the colonel said; and if the road had been a little longer, he would have told another famous story of his, about the Ranee of Odeypoor, whom he once met borne on a palankin by six tribu-

tary rajahs. Fortunately the way was too short, and so it wasn't worth while beginning it.

When they got inside the gate, out of the sun, Lady Sweetapple felt much better. She would try and walk home. She knew she was too heavy for them to carry.

"Just what I thought," whispered Florry to Alice. "It *is* all sham."

"Oh, Florry, how can you say such a thing!" said Alice. "Don't you see how pale she is?"

"Just like a chameleon," said Florry, who had drawn a few steps back with her sister, to ease her mind, as she said; while Mrs. Barker and the colonel, and Harry and Edward, were busily attending to Lady Sweetapple. "Just like a chameleon, dear. Some women can make their faces white or red for nothing, at a moment's warning."

"What makes the chameleon change colour?" asked Alice, Socratically.

"I'm sure I can't tell," said Florry.

"You know well enough fear makes them pale; and whether it be fear that has made Lady Sweetapple so faint, I am sure her illness was not feigned."

"Well, I daresay you are right," said Florry. "But there she is, standing on her feet again,

and ready to try to walk home. See, too, Harry offers her his arm, and she takes it."

Without a word more, Florry flew back to Lady Sweetapple, and drew her arm through her own.

"Dear Lady Sweetapple, I am quite sure you cannot walk home supported by only one arm. Let me hold you up on this side while Mr. Fortescue supports you on the other."

"Thank you so much," said the siren, lifting her great, soft, languid eyes, and gazing on Florry. "How silly I was to feel so faint! but I really feel better now."

"Better or not, you must not be allowed to walk without two of us to support you, one on either side. What a dreadful thing it would be if you were to fall down all at once and cut your face against a stone!"

And so the persevering Florry clung to her rival, and never left her till she was safely landed in the hall at High Beech. Then she crept upstairs, and Florry said something to herself which must be told in another chapter.



CHAPTER XIX.

LADY SWEETAPPLE RECOVERS, AND DISCOVERS
SOMETHING.

AHANK heaven ! if she is really ill, she will have to go to bed, or not be able to appear at luncheon, and lose the drive to King Edward's Oak this afternoon."

At which combination of pleasant thoughts Florry laughed outright, and ran up-stairs like a gazelle to her own old school-room.

"I think she is provided for for the day, or at least till dinner-time," were her words to Alice a moment after. "How nice it will be if you and I, and Edward and Harry, and Colonel and Mrs. Barker, and mamma and Count Pantouffles, all go in the break to King Edward's Oak !"

"Oh, Florry, how very unkind you are !" said Alice. "Do you know I wish with all my heart she may throw off her faintness, come down to luncheon, and go with us to the Oak !"

"If you go on so," said Florry, "I'll throw this piece of soap at your head! You know I don't wish her any real harm; but it's very hard to think she is always pushing herself in between me and Harry."

"I don't like revenge," said Alice: "but for all that, I hope you will not throw that piece of soap at my head."

"I've a great mind to," said Florry; and just as she was working it about in her hands, it slipped between her fingers and slid away under a chest of drawers.

"How provoking!" said Alice: "and it was my pet piece."

"Never mind," said Florry; "Palmer will find it, I am sure. There's the gong; let us run down and enjoy ourselves while we can."

So they both ran down, as merry as larks, and had a long story to tell of their adventures to Lady Carlton and the count and Mr. Beeswing.

Mr. and Mrs. Marjoram had not yet made their appearance.

"Do you know, mamma," said Florry, "we have had such a nice walk, and it was so hot, and the road was so dusty, and Miss Markham was so kind, and we ate so many strawberries; and at last, just as we were coming away, poor Lady Sweetapple

turned quite faint from stooping down so much to pick the strawberries, and she would have fallen if Mr. Fortescue had not caught her in his arms; and we were all so frightened, and her pretty hat was so crushed; and Mr. Fortescue and Mr. Vernon carried her along the road in a chair, and then I and Mr. Fortescue held her up on either side till we got home, and now she has gone to bed, and——”

At this moment the door opened, to the amazement of the whole party, and especially of Florry. Lady Sweetapple walked into the room, as lovely as ever, and with no trace of faintness on her face.

“ Dear Lady Sweetapple,” said Lady Carlton, “ here, Florry has been giving us such a doleful account of your faintness, and just as she had put you to bed, you make your appearance as if nothing whatever had happened !”

“ You must put down a good deal of it to Miss Carlton’s imagination,” said Lady Sweetapple, with a slight sneer. “ The truth is, that I was very faint for a while, but now I am quite well, thanks to the kindness of the whole party, who were so good to me.”

“ I am so glad it was a false alarm, so far as I am concerned,” said Lady Carlton; “ and now let us go to luncheon.”

At this moment, Mr. and Mrs. Marjoram appeared — he looking as miserable as though he had heard the “Whole Duty of Man” as well as the “Book of Homilies,” and she with an air of serene triumph, like an early martyr rejoicing that he would soon be broiled on a gridiron.

Now Colonel Barker, though a very gallant officer and most polite gentleman, was not always famous for discretion. As soon as he saw Mr. Marjoram he broke out —

“Why, Marjoram, you have made another conquest! Miss Markham inquired very tenderly after you, and she is coming to dine here again to-day on purpose to see you. You *are* a lucky fellow!”

At these words the countenance of Mr. Marjoram assumed an expression much more rueful than that of Don Quixote in his most agonising moments; we doubt whether that famous knight looked half so chapfallen even when he heard that a magician had flown away with his library of knightly romance. As for Mrs. Marjoram, the chastened severity of the early Christian martyr gave place to the malignity of his heathen persecutors. Had she been Empress of Rome at that moment in the second century, she would have hurled her husband to the lions, and roasted Miss Markham before a slow fire.

As it was, she could only give vent to her feelings by uttering the word "Indeed!" in reply to Colonel Barker, and by treading violently on her husband's great toe, on which was a bunion which would have given the chiropodist of the Emperor of Cornucopia full employment for a whole week. Poor Mr. Marjoram said nothing but "My dear!" but he winced visibly and groaned audibly.

"Do you think, dear Lady Sweetapple," said Lady Carlton, "that you will be equal to the drive to King Edward's Oak, and that you can sit on the grass there while we have tea?"

"Oh yes," said Lady Sweetapple; "I am quite well again. Nothing would give me greater pleasure."

So it was settled that they were all to go, down to Mr. Marjoram.

But how were they to go? They could not walk, at least none of the ladies could walk; for the oak was a long way off, quite at the other end of the chase, and the way thither led over many a hill and dell across the fern and heath.

"Some of us will drive and some ride," said Lady Carlton; "and I hope to have the pleasure of showing you my ponies, and how well I can drive them, Lady Sweetapple. The carriage will hold three,

and I suppose the two brothers had no wish to be separated.

"Now I suppose that will be made up when we have had 'I suppose Harry is to go to the same marriage with Flora Fortescue' and the reason which you all understand we could not say so, and she had to say 'I will be very married. I should like it very much.'

"Now if you please, I fancy you would like to ride; when shall it be?"

"I should like to ride," said Alice, who knew that a man in the world that Edward Vernon would wish to ride at her side.

"I do not wish to ride," said Florry, who saw in the arrangement which disposed of Lady Sweetapple a chance of being side by side with Harry Fortescue in another carriage.

"You can't ride alone, my dear," said Lady Carlton to Alice. "Mr. Marjoram, would you like to ride?"

"Very much indeed," said Mr. Marjoram, who knew that Mrs. Marjoram could not ride, and so hoped to escape for a little while from his tormentor.

"And I should like to ride if I may," said Edward Vernon very meekly.

"Very well," said Lady Carlton, "that will do

nicely. Mr. Marjoram, Mr. Vernon, and Alice will ride, and the rest of the party can go in the break. So it is all arranged, and now let us hope that there will be no thunderstorm to mar our pleasure."

"Who can say?" said Colonel Barker. "It's just as sultry as I ever felt it in India."

This was the signal for the party to rise. Such heat was quite bad enough without the bore of listening to the colonel's Indian experiences.

"We haven't much time to get ready," said Lady Carlton. "I have ordered the carriages at a quarter to four, and it is now past three."

Not much time indeed! only about three-quarters of an hour. But what is that when spent by a woman like Lady Sweetapple in making herself bewitching, and in pondering how she should spring her mine on Harry Fortescue about Miss Edith Price?

To tell the truth, the more she thought of that rather mythical young lady—who, after all, might not even be young—the less she liked it. Sometimes she said to herself that Edith Price must be nobody, then she was sure she must be somebody—one of the Welsh Prices, or Price-Prices, who, as is well known, were descended from the first gorilla that inhabited Wales when it was a tropical country,

and consequently looked down upon all other gorillas. Then she said that could never be. Welsh ladies of good family and broad acres never lived in Lupus Street. The end of it was, she could make nothing of Edith Price, and remained as wise as she had been before.

All this passed through her mind as Mrs. Crump was getting her ready for her drive in the pony-carriage ; and we really must say, though the fair Amicia was generally very good-tempered, on this occasion she was a little put out because she could not have her way. The same thing happens to all of us sometimes, so we must not be too hard on Lady Sweetapple.

Then, too, there was that little fainting-fit when she suddenly heard the name of Mr. Sonderling at Miss Markham's cottage. The reader is no doubt impatient to have that mystery explained, but he must be gentle and wait, for it is quite impossible to explain everything in the first volume of a novel. If it were, all the novels in the world would be one-volumed—a thing as much out of fashion as an old single-barrelled flint gun.

With regard to Mr. Sonderling, all that Lady Sweetapple said when she regained her room after luncheon was—

“It is not very pleasant to meet him here, but I am not at all afraid of him ;” and with this declaration the reader must rest content till we think it good to enlighten the darkness of his mind. Of another “him” Lady Sweetapple thought and mused a good deal while Mrs. Crump was adorning her, but all her thoughts came to this : how much she would have given to be going to King Edward’s Oak in the break, and how determined she was to have it out with him about Edith Price before the day was out.

The rest of the ladies spent the three-quarters of an hour in various ways ; some in dressing, some in reading, and some in writing letters. Mrs. Barker sat down and wrote to her faithful cook and house-keeper, saying that she and the colonel would not be back till Tuesday or Wednesday, and to mind and look after the maids, and to give the house into the custody of the police during their absence ; she was to be sure and have it thoroughly scrubbed and cleaned from top to bottom, and it would be just as well to send for the chimneysweeps, and to have the portico washed down by the painter. Mrs. Marjoram also wrote a letter home to her female factotum ; but it said nothing about Mr. Marjoram, or of cleanliness and tidiness. It was all about godliness—which, in that house in Great Cumberland Street, was not next

to cleanliness, whatever it may be in other abodes—and enclosed a tract entitled “The Maid-of-all-Work’s only Master,” which bore on its title-page the name of the Reverend Jabez Knagger, and purported to have been thrown down areas and similarly distributed to the tune of fifty thousand. Lady Carlton read the last *Quarterly*; Florry and Alice wrote letters; and as letter-writing is infectious, Edward Vernon wrote a long letter to another idle apprentice in the Temple, and Harry Fortescue had the audacity to sit down in the library and, in the face of man and light of day, to write a letter. And to whom do you think it was addressed? Why, of all people in the world, to “Miss Edith Price!”

Now, of course, we know what is inside that letter just as much as if we had written it ourselves. But for all that we are not going to satisfy vulgar curiosity by allowing any reader to pry into a lady’s private letters. For the present they must be content with the fact that Miss Edith Price was no invention of Mr. Beeswing’s valet, but a real being of flesh and blood, and actually living at No. —, Lupus Street, Pimlico.

When they had all done their letters, or almost before they had finished them, in limped Mr. Podager to tell “my lady” that “the carriages

is ready and the horses at the door." Away they all rushed up-stairs to get ready, and this was how it happened that Amicia met them all running up the slippery staircase just as she was tripping down it, in the full flush of fashion and beauty, to find herself in the hall the only person really ready of the whole party at a quarter to four.

Now we hope to be believed when we say that Lady Sweetapple was not at all a curious woman. She was not one of that prying sort of whom you have to beware when you are writing letters lest they should stand behind you with the eyes of lynxes and read all your secrets behind your back. Still, she was reasonably curious, as most men and women are; and so when Mr. Podager brought a lot of letters for the post in his hand out of the drawing-room and put them into the "post office," as a great china dish in the hall was called, asking her at the same time whether she had any letters for the post, the thought arose in her mind that other people might have written letters though she had not, and those people soon resolved themselves in her mind into one person, and that person Harry Fortescue. "No, I have no letters;" and then, as the tardy Podager limped off, she said to herself—

"I wonder if Harry Fortescue has written letters to anybody."

With such thoughts in her head, though it was very mean and very wicked, Lady Sweetapple went to the dish and began to turn over the letters. You see, of course, what a dangerous woman she was, and if she ever stays in your house, you will have to turn all your letters direction down lest she should see with whom you are corresponding.

"Mrs. Jawkins, Petersburg Place, Paddington, W.;" that was Mrs. Barker's letter. "I don't care for that," said Lady Sweetapple to herself. "Mrs. Tody, 10, Great Cumberland Street, W." "Nor for that." It was Mrs. Marjoram's letter enclosing the tract.

So Amicia went on sorting the letters, like a lovely little postmistress, in a careless way, till all at once she started just as Robinson Crusoe started when he saw the savage foot-print in the sand.

"Miss Edith Price, No. —, Lupus Street, London, S.W."—and in Harry's handwriting, too! What a horrible confirmation of that valet's story; and Lady Sweetapple, having like listeners, and eaves-droppers, and pryers into secrets in general, found out something very unpleasant by the process, retreated from the dish and the hall into the

library, and sat down for a moment to recover her feelings ; for, to tell the truth, she felt almost as faint as when she had heard Mr. Sonderling's name in the old maid's cottage.

Before we proceed, pray observe what a splendid opportunity we have lost. If this had been a sensational instead of a true and rational story, Lady Sweetapple would have stolen Harry Fortescue's letter, and rendered her dear little self liable to penal servitude. She would have torn it open, read it, perhaps answered it in a feigned hand, which would have deceived Harry Fortescue. In despair, he might have committed suicide. Edward Vernon, out of love for him, would have followed his example, and Alice Carlton, for the same reason, would have taken prussic acid or cyanide of potassium. Having caused so much mischief, Lady Sweetapple would have confessed her fault, been brought to trial, and sentenced to pick oakum for three years at Coldbath Fields or Millbank Prison. Florry Carlton would have died an old maid, or married a curate, or something very "detrimental ;" and as for the grey hairs of Sir Thomas and Lady Carlton, they would have gone down in care and sorrow to the grave. All this might have happened if Lady Sweetapple had not been restrained

by the usages of society ; but though she might read an address by stealth, she had not yet got so far as stealing letters ; and so there she sat, in great mortification of spirit, till she heard the others chattering like starlings in the hall.





CHAPTER XX.

THE DRIVE TO KING EDWARD'S OAK.

HERE we are, all ready, dear Lady Sweetapple," said Lady Carlton, looking into the library. "I am afraid we have kept you waiting."

Lady Sweetapple rose and obeyed the call, and at the hall-door found the equestrians just in the act of mounting. Alice Carlton and Edward Vernon were already mounted, only waiting for Mr. Marjoram, whose stirrups needed adjustment, for you must know that Mr. Marjoram was one of those riders whose stirrups are always either too long or too short.

Edward was impatient to start, and so was Edward's horse, which belonged to Florry; and he was just in the act of calling to Mr. Marjoram to make haste or they should never be off.

By this time the break was already nearly full. First of all, Colonel Barker handed in Mrs. Marjoram with great style, and then Mrs. Barker with

great tenderness. Then came Florry and Mr. Beeswing; last of all Harry and the colonel climbed up into that commodious vehicle. Lady Carlton and Lady Sweetapple were quickly handed into the pony carriage by Count Pantouffles, and so the end was that both the carriages had started before the riding party, in spite of all Edward Vernon's exhortations to Mr. Marjoram.

“Now, do look alive, Mr. Marjoram,” said Edward again, as his horse and Alice's began to curvet and caper.

“I'll come as soon as I can,” said the rueful Marjoram, who, as it was, felt very much hurried; and he then mounted Kitty, a very well-bred mare, which Sir Thomas generally rode, with one stirrup two holes longer than the other. He said, indeed, afterwards, it was all the groom's fault; but it was not, it was all his own, chopping and changing with the leathers. In fact, Mr. Marjoram is not the first man whose legs have suddenly seemed the one to grow longer and the other shorter as soon as he tries to mount a horse. But at last they were off.

“How nice it will be!” said Alice.

“Yes, how nice!” said Edward. “Let us trot on, or we shall never overtake the ponies.”

Suiting the action to the word, Edward Vernon

put his horse to a smart trot. It was a ladies' horse, and yet a good trotter, because Florry was a young lady who despised the everlasting canter to which young ladies are condemned. Alice Carlton began to canter, and at the same moment Kitty began to trot roughly and highly, to the great inconvenience of Mr. Marjoram.

"This is rather quick work," he called out to Edward; "I shall never be able to stand it in this heat."

"Stand what?" said Edward. "Do you suppose we came out to exercise the horses at a walk, or to stand still? Come along; we shall never get to King Edward's Oak if we lag behind in this way."

"But I don't like it," said Mr. Marjoram, in an imploring tone.

But for all that, he had to like it, for Edward and Alice pushed on down one of the rises in the park, and Mr. Marjoram had to follow, for Kitty was not a filly to stay behind. It did not take them long to descend that hill, and on the top of a second they saw the carriages still far ahead.

"Mayn't we go gently for a little?" said Mr. Marjoram, who was already almost out of breath.

"Certainly not," said Edward; "we must press

on. You'll get your second wind in no time. Who cares for a stitch in the side out riding?"

Now Mr. Marjoram did care for a stitch, and he cared for it very much; but he had to ride on, for the rest rode.

At last they overtook the carriages, and shot past them; for the very efforts that Alice and Edward had been making to check their horses for Mr. Marjoram's sake, only made them more full of fire, and the pace was almost furious as they passed the carriages.

"Not so fast, Alice!" cried out her mother.

"Well done, Ned!" cried Harry, as they passed the break.

"Well ridden, John Gilpin!" bawled Mr. Beeswing to Mr. Marjoram, as he flew past like a flash of lightning.

To tell the truth, it was some time since Mr. Marjoram had ridden even a slug, and we are not sure that he had ever ridden so spirited an animal as Kitty. However that might be, she had him entirely at her mercy, and took him out as completely for a ride as ever horse carried a tailor. There are some people who, when they are being run away with, look comfortable and affect serenity and pleasure, though they have them not; but there was no

pleasure or serenity in Mr. Marjoram's face. On the contrary, he looked supremely uncomfortable, and if he had had a grapnel or small anchor that would have brought Kitty up, he would have thrown it out and moored her fast at once. But he had no such anchor, and so was forced to ride on. In an unlucky moment, too, he had omitted to put on those exploded articles of dress called straps, and the consequence was that his trousers very soon began to work up, and that very unequally on either leg. As he passed the carriages, he revealed an uneven expanse of white cotton socks above his highlows. He had lost his whip, and was tugging at Kitty's neck with both hands. But the more he tugged the more Kitty took the bit between her teeth, and the more she devoured the ground. No ship ever ran before a gale with more evident signals of distress than Mr. Marjoram on Kitty.

"This is as good as a race," said Edward to Alice, some little time after they had cleared the carriages. "Do you think he will be able to live the pace to King Edward's Oak?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Alice. "I suppose he can ride, or he would never have chosen it. I think riding fast such fun. Let us all race for the oak."

And for the oak they accordingly raced, the two young ones always managing, though with great difficulty, to keep ahead of Kitty, who was the most irrepressible animal of the three. The oak was reached, as Edward afterwards said, in fifteen minutes from the time of starting, though the distance was over three miles. We believe that after all races it is remarked that both horses and jockeys are distressed, and whatever Kitty might be, Mr. Marjoram was so much distressed, both in mind and body, that he dismounted at once with the remark that nothing would ever induce him to ride "that devil" home.

"Do you really mean to call Kitty a devil?" said Edward; "and do you mean to say that it wasn't awfully jolly to tear along in that way?"

"Yes, I do," said Mr. Marjoram bitterly. "Whoever rides Kitty home, I am determined I will not."

During this frantic ride we have forgotten the rest of the party. In the pony-carriage little or nothing was said. Lady Carlton, indeed, tried to force the conversation by some remarks first addressed to Lady Sweetapple, and then to Count Pantouffles. But Lady Sweetapple was full of that letter to Edith Price. She was so absent, away in Lupus Street, fancying all kinds of things about that lady's relations to Harry Fortescue, that she could only answer

“yes” or “no,” and even in the use of those monosyllables she was very incoherent. Count Pantouffles, as we all know, did not shine in conversation, least of all in the country. Little, therefore, was to be got out of him except an occasional “very fine!” “delightful!” “charming!” and other expletives of the superlative degree. Had it not been for that little episode of the Wild Huntsman when Alice and Edward and Mr. Marjoram shot by, Lady Carlton would have had nothing to say during her drive. A duller expedition to King Edward’s Oak she had never had. Still, it was very pleasant, though rather hot; but as she flicked her ponies every now and then with just a little flick, she felt that she might have had more sociable companions. But how could Count Pantouffles talk when he was all outside? and how could Amicia converse when her heart was full of Edith Price, and when, besides, she felt that if she made the slightest attempt to cross-question Harry Fortescue on the subject, he would instantly see that she had been so mean as to read the addresses of the letters in the china dish? She reflected on all this during the drive, and by the time she got to the oak saw quite clearly that she must not speak of Edith Price to Harry Fortescue for twenty-four hours at least.

"Very provoking!" she said to herself; "but so it must be. Not a word must be said till that letter has passed out of his memory."

As for the rest of them in the break, they made up for the silence of the rest by their incessant talk. Colonel Barker talked to Mrs. Marjoram, and Mr. Beeswing to Mrs. Barker. We have no time to repeat all the wise and witty things that were said in that half-hour, but they were many. As for Florry, she was in the seventh heaven of delight. At last she was side by side with Harry Fortescue, and the widow was safe in the pony-carriage. What she said exactly is not recorded, and would not have been worth repeating; but the result was that when Harry Fortescue got out of the break, he felt as though he had been very remiss in paying Florry Carlton so little attention since his visit to **High Beech**.

"That's a very nice girl," he said to himself. "I never thought her so nice before."

It was a great step for Florry to have made in half an hour, if she had only known it. But the worst is, she did not know it.

Well, now we have them all at the oak, and what was it like? We must begin by saying that it was not a very old oak. Oaks of the time of Edward the

Fourth are not such old trees; but as trees they are none the worse for that. Without going so far as to out-Darwin Darwin, and to say that animals are descended from vegetables, we may say that a very old oak is very like a very old person, in that it is generally very ugly. Thus we know oaks that are said to have been old oaks at the Conquest—but what are they? Mere wrecks; a great hollow inside with a little bark outside, and a wizened branch or two at top. So also we know many old people whose only merit is that they are very old—without eyes, hearing, teeth, or hair; mere broken-down palsied wrecks of what once were vigorous and lovely men and women. Now King Edward's was not as one of those oaks, for it was in full life and vigour, and except that it had lost here and there a branch as big as an ordinary tree, its trunk stood without crack or chasm as sturdily as the merry monarch himself in the fifteenth century. We hope no one will here snap us up and say the “merry monarch” lived in the seventeenth century. As if England was such a beggarly country as only to have had one merry monarch in her history! So far from that being the case, there were merry monarchs before Charles the Second's time just as there have been merry monarchs after him, and none so merry in any century as

Edward the Fourth in the fifteenth. Whether this noble tree had ever seen him here with Elizabeth Woodville or Mistress Jane Shore, no man could tell. All that was known in county and village history was, that the great oak on Deadman's Hill in High Beech Park was called King Edward's Oak, and had been called so from time immemorial. It had got its name somehow or other, and it kept it, just as many a family has got its name and its motto from some deed now long since forgotten, but which was, nevertheless, a gallant deed the day it was done, and rang through the country and became a name for ever.

So there it stood, crowning the hill in the bright sunshine, with the deer standing at gaze under its widespread branches, on that 2nd of June, 1870, until Edward and Alice and Marjoram dashed up and scared them away.

When the rest came up, there was a dismounting and alighting, and the horses were led off and the carriages driven under some other trees, and Lady Carlton and her friends were left alone under King Edward's Oak.

“What a noble tree!” said Lady Sweetapple, whose mind being now made up as to the impolicy of asking any question just now about Edith Price, felt more at ease and more able to speak.

“Noble indeed!” said Lady Carlton, whose affection for the tree was almost romantic.

“How many generations has it not seen out, and how many more will it not see?”

“Very many—a good number, certainly,” said the count, in his unmeaning way.

“How much I wish,” said Alice, “that I had lived in those days!”

“In what days?” asked Mr. Beeswing, cynically.

“In the days of Edward the Fourth the merry monarch,” said Alice, with an innocence which showed how little she was aware of the peculiar line which Edward’s mirth affected.

“I think you would find it much pleasanter to be what you are—the child of your time,” said Mr. Beeswing. “I have no manner of doubt that the fifteenth century was a most unpleasant period of history to have lived in; and as for your merry monarch, I believe him to have been a cruel cut-throat and a wicked libertine. What do you think, Edward?”

“Indeed,” said the idle Edward, “I never thought anything about it. The fact was, I did not go in for law and modern history at Oxford, and so I know nothing about any of the merry monarchs.”

All this time Lady Carlton was giving directions

about the promised tea. The servants had been sent on, and a fire lighted close by before they came, and in a few moments they were to have tea under the oak. As for Florry and Harry, they went on talking after they had alighted much in the same way as they had talked in the carriage. Lady Sweetapple stood by, rather indignant; but she could not help it, and she was forced for a while to put up with Count Pantouffles. Mr. Beeswing flitted about as a sort of lieutenant to Lady Carlton; Colonel and Mrs. Barker stood side by side, as much in love with one another under King Edward's Oak as they had been in the banyan groves and mango topes of Hindostan; and Mrs. Marjoram was close to Mr. Marjoram, who sat on the grass counting his bruises and abrasions, while she administered what might be called a field clinical lecture on the wickedness of riding strange horses to that unhappy man.

"Now it is all ready, at last," said Lady Carlton. "All who wish for tea, come and sit down."

They all wished for tea, and they all sat down except Mr. Marjoram, who was already seated, and, in fact, could scarcely rise. Need we say that Edward Vernon sat next to Alice? No, we need not; especially as we have to say that Harry

Fortescue again found himself between Lady Sweetapple and Florry Carlton, and was again the bone of contention to those ladies.

After an interval of tea-drinking, Mr. Beeswing began—

“ You don’t seem to have practised your riding lately, Marjoram. I am afraid your mare was too much for you.”

“ So much too much for me,” said that meekest of men, “ that I am going to ask for a seat in the break when we go home, and to try and get some one else to ride Miss Kitty, who is quite beyond my power to restrain.”

“ Oh, Mr. Marjoram ! ” said Alice, “ I believe you can ride very well ; indeed, quite as well as Mr. Vernon. Why, you kept up with us bravely to the end, and we only reached the oak a length or two before you. You knew it was to be a race.”

“ You are very kind, Miss Alice,” said Mr. Marjoram ; “ but allow me to ask how you feel after the race ? ”

“ Feel ! I feel quite well,” said Alice ; “ why shouldn’t I ? ”

“ And I, on the other hand,” said Mr. Marjoram, with something very like a groan, “ feel quite ill ; and, like you, I may add, and why shouldn’t I ? ”

I never ought to have mounted Kitty, and Mrs. Marjoram quite agrees with me."

"Then," said Mr. Beeswing in a low voice, "it's the first time in their lives that they have ever agreed in anything. But Mrs. Marjoram is going to say something; let us listen."

"Mr. Marjoram," said that lady, "you are, as usual, quite wrong in saying that I agree with you in this matter, or, in fact, in anything else. I think it base in a man not to be able to ride; and, therefore, I think you ought to have mounted Kitty, as you call her; and I do not agree with you in thinking her skittishness, as you seem to imply, any excuse for your bad horsemanship. It is the old story, 'a bad workman always complains of his tools.'"

"My dear," said Mr. Marjoram, "allow me to explain."

"No, Mr. Marjoram, you shall not explain—at least, not in my hearing. Be content with the exhibition which you have made of yourself, and drink your tea and say nothing."

While this unseemly altercation was going on, Florry Carlton on one side, and Lady Sweetapple on the other, were trying hard to win Harry Fortescue's attention. It was a painful position for

Amicia to feel, as she thought, that she had Harry Fortescue's secret in her possession—to be sure that she had the ace of trumps, and yet not to be able to play it. This rather restrained her, and so gave Florry, who had no hidden mysteries to conceal, a great advantage. Never had Lady Sweetapple seemed so stiff and constrained, never had her remarks been so full of inuendoes, which seemed to mean nothing; and never had Florry Carlton seemed so natural, clever, and unaffected. In that sitting, at least, she had it all her own way, and when Harry Fortescue rose from the grass under the great oak, he felt more and more that he had been very unjust to Florry Carlton.

“So nice, darling!” whispered Florry to Alice.
“He's getting just like Edward!”

“I'm so glad to see it,” said Alice. “What a happy girl you are!”





CHAPTER XXI.

THE THUNDER-STORM AND THE GIPSY.

GAATHERINGS of men and women are like the flocking of birds and beasts. There is usually one among them who plays the part of a sentinel; and on this occasion that duty devolved on Colonel Barker. After he had made sufficient love in his quiet way to Mrs. Barker, and had drank his tea, he moved away a little from the oak, and came back in a minute or two to say—

“Take my word for it, we are going to have a thunder-storm.”

By this time Edward and Harry were so intoxicated by love and admiration, that they felt inclined to chaff Colonel Barker.

“But suppose we don’t choose to take your word, Colonel Barker, what will you say then?”

“Oh, then I should say,” said Colonel Barker, getting red about the gills—“then I should say you

were a pair of blind puppies, who can't see a yard before them, let alone observing the weather! Never, in all my campaigns in India, have I seen such plain signs of a thunder-storm, and a very bad one."

"Oh," said Edward, "pray don't tell us anything about India. The very word makes one hot to hear, and it's quite hot enough without it."

"It will be down on us in five minutes," said Colonel Barker.

"I daresay it will," said the incorrigible Harry, leaning against the bole of the gigantic tree. "Is it safer here, Colonel Barker, under shelter, or out in the open?"

"I must say I thought every fool knew that it was dangerous to stay under trees in a thunder-storm," said Colonel Barker.

"Very true," said Edward; "but then, you see, Harry isn't a fool, and that's why he asks the question. He's a wise fellow, and wants to know."

"Well," said the honest colonel, "it's no time to stand disputing; we must leave the tree. The choice is either to stay here with the chance of being struck, or go out into the open and be drenched to the skin. As for me, I would sooner be wet than killed, so I shall leave the tree."

"All right," said Harry. "I shall wait till it begins to lighten, and then——"

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when a dazzling flash, followed immediately by a tremendous peal, blazed before their eyes. At the same time a few sullen drops of rain fell, but such drops! each of them, as Mrs. Barker said, was as big as her umbrella.

"I suppose you will come away now, young man?" said Colonel Barker; and we know when Colonel Barker used the term "young man" what he meant by it.

"No, I sha'n't," said Harry; "I think it better not to go to the certainty of being wet to escape the uncertainty of being struck by lightning. Just look —why should this tree be struck? there are plenty of others all about. Then turning to Florry, "What do you say, Miss Carlton—shall we leave the shelter of the tree, or shall we go out into the open to get wet?"

"I will do as you do in all things," said Florry; "that is to say—no! I will do as mamma wishes. She must decide."

By this time the rain came down, not in single drops, but in a perfect down-pour. It fell so fast and so hard, that all over the greensward the drops

as they fell jumped up again from a sheet of water, just as they do in heavy London rain out of the dirty puddles. All the party were on their feet; Lady Sweetapple stood alone, looking out on the deluge; Lady Carlton was supported by her daughters on either side; Count Pantouffles and Mr. Beeswing were side by side; and the count, to keep his head cool, we suppose, took off his hat and bowed to the storm.

“I suppose you do that out of respect to Jupiter and the ancient gods,” said Mr. Beeswing. “At such moments as these it is as well to be safe on all sides. I am sure Mrs. Marjoram is praying hard, if she is not telling Mr. Marjoram that the storm is all his fault.”

“No, indeed,” said the count. “I do know nothing of your Jupiter since I was out of the college. I did just take off my hat because my head was so hot.”

To such perfection had this exquisite diplomatist brought the practice of bowing, that he bowed involuntarily whenever he lifted his hat from his head.

All this time the storm continued to rage, and the party, with the exception of Colonel Barker and Mrs. Barker, had not left King Edward’s Oak. For

their excuse, let it be remembered that they were most of them women, and there are few women who would not sooner run the risk of a thunder-bolt than face the certainty of spoiling their things.

“What shall we do?” said Lady Carlton. “I am afraid it is very dangerous to stay where we are.”

“Come away, if you value your life, Lady Carlton, and bring all the rest with you,” bawled Colonel Barker, who by this time, with Mrs. Barker, were drenched to the skin, and looked as sleek and shiny as if they had been dressed in mackintoshes.

“What do you say, Lady Sweetapple?” asked Lady Carlton, taking as it were a woman’s council of war.

“I think we had better stay here,” said Lady Sweetapple. “It is a grand sight, and I can see it much more comfortably under the tree than if I were wet through.”

So with Amicia dress had carried the day.

“What do you say, Florry? and you, Alice? and you, Mr. Fortescue? and you, Mr. Vernon?”

The guilty four, as they might be called, though they had done nothing wrong, were unanimous in thinking that they were very well as they were. Florry and Alice wished to stay where Harry and Edward stayed, and Harry and Edward wished to

stay where Florry and Alice stayed. But Harry was the spokesman, and he said outright—

“ I think as we have stayed here so long and nothing has happened to us, we may just as well stay the storm out. Look at those awful examples yonder, and see what comes of a woman who always follows her husband’s advice.”

As he said this he pointed to Mrs. Barker, who was so drenched with rain and so blown about by the wind that her clothes clung to her body, and revealed rotundities of person which elderly ladies’ dress is expressly calculated to conceal. Mrs. Barker’s dress fitted her as tightly as her garments fitted Noah’s wife, or Mrs. Shem, Ham, and Japhet in the Noah’s ark, and altogether she had become what Edward Vernon called “ a figure of fun.”

So it went on, most of the party standing under the tree, which gave them most generous shelter, scarce a drop falling through its leaves ; Colonel and Mrs. Barker floundering about like the hippopotamus and his wife in the open ; the servants doing as their betters did, and hiding under trees in awful defiance of all the scientific rules about thunder-storms ; the horses making the best of it, and the carriages getting thoroughly wet in the seats, for neither could be shut, and no one had ever thought on such a day

of wraps and waterproofs. So they remained ; Mr. and Mrs. Marjoram keeping well apart, the wife divided between two agonies—the first, at the prospect of being translated, in the twinkling of an eye, either to a better or a worse place than Great Cumberland Street ; the second, lest she should be forced to leave the tree, and so ruin her dress in a moment. As for Mr. Marjoram, he was a lamb. If he had been struck, he would have gone where all good husbands go who have been tormented in this world. What, then, would have become of Mrs. Marjoram ? Who can tell ? But one thing is quite certain, that in that other world Mr. Marjoram would have been supremely unhappy if he had been parted from Mrs. Marjoram ; for have you not all of you heard that Mr. Marjoram dearly loved his wife ? For her sake he would have been content to have been a goat, or a tiger, or a rhinoceros, in a future state. The only thing that he could not have borne would have been everlasting separation from his persecutor. You see, therefore, that Mr. Marjoram went even beyond the Christian precept. Instead of merely praying for his persecutors, he actually asked to be with them for ever ; an excess of charity nowhere, we believe, inculcated in the Gospel.



But we are in the midst of a thunder-storm, and not engaged on a treatise on Christian charity. The storm went on, but the party under the oak, not encouraged to quit it by what they saw of the practical effect of the colonel's teaching, and besides, growing bolder by impunity, began to take heart, and having taken heart, to look about them. Then they were first aware that there was some one else under the tree.

Florry, with her quick eyes, was the first to see that some one else, or, at any rate, with her quick tongue to talk about it.

"Look at the side of the tree, Mr. Fortescue, and tell me what you see."

Harry turned his eyes, which after his refusal to leave the tree had been for the most part fixed on Florry's face, in the direction of the tree, and there he saw a gipsy woman, with a baby in her arms, clinging close to the tree for shelter.

"What fun!" he said. "Now we can all have our fortunes told."

"Yes; what fun!" said Florry. "Only I think it better fun to hear other people's fortunes told than to have one's own told."

"That I call cowardice," said Harry, "just as I call it cowardice in Colonel Barker to stalk about

yonder with Mrs. Barker, because he is afraid of being struck by lightning."

By this time every one had discovered the gipsy, who stood there with the natural dignity of her race, unabashed before that gay company of ladies and gentlemen.

Lady Carlton was the first to approach her, with the words, "My good woman, where did you come from?"

"Good! yes, I am good," said the gipsy. "I am not of your religion, which says there is none good but One. I am good. A woman I am, too, not a lady. Whence did I come? Out of the earth, our people say, at first, to which I shall return; but lately, across the fields, out of the woods, through the heather and fern, along wastes and commons. Wher-ever there is a bit of unbroken turf or unfenced woodland, thence I come and thither I go. I am a vagrant, a wanderer, ay, and a trespasser, as your law calls it. When the stocks were in fashion, you put me in the stocks, and now you force me to pick oakum, or to travel on the treadmill, and if you give me charity you drive me into the casual ward of the workhouse."

"Really, I have never done any of these horrid things," said Lady Carlton.

“Not you, perhaps,” said the gipsy. “Not you, but your class, your system, your law, or whatever you call it. You say you will tame the Romany and make them good. I have told you we are good already. Do you wish to make us beasts of burden, like your Saxon labourers, who toil from morning till night, and scarce know their right hand from their left? Is there a man or a woman on your estate who can tell you anything of this very oak which now shelters us from the storm? No! Not a man here or elsewhere knows anything of the traditions and history of his country; but the poor gipsy can tell you all about it. Do you know why this is called King Edward’s Oak, and still more why this is known as Deadman’s Hill?”

“I am sure I can’t tell,” said Lady Carlton, rather awed by the stern manner of the gipsy woman.

“I am sure, Mrs. Gipsy,” said Harry, “it doesn’t much matter why it is called Deadman’s Hill, or why the oak is called King Edward’s Oak. The great thing for us to think of is, that here it is, and shelters us from the storm.”

“Why call me ‘Mrs. Gipsy?’” said the woman. “How do you know this child is my own? It may be stolen from some of your stock, to sell again, as you accuse the Romany so often of doing. It makes

me laugh when I think how many sins are laid at our door which we have never done, or thought of doing. Geese, pigs, fowls, sheep, horses, oxen, and even children, whenever they are not to be found, it is all the gipsy's doing."

"If I had known your name I would not have called you 'Mrs. Gipsy,'" said Harry, rather frightened at the energy of the woman.

"Then call me Sinaminta," said the woman; "and let me tell you it does matter a deal by what names things and people are called. The whole story of a thing, or a man, or a woman, often lies in a name, and it is only foolish people who say, like you, that the past is nothing and the present everything, for such people have no future."

"That's one for you, Harry," said Mr. Beeswing, who had by this time come up. Where had he been all this time? We are sorry to say, fast asleep on the other side of the tree. Tea, as is well known, is a narcotic to some people, and so it was to Mr. Beeswing, who used often to say if it were not for the sound sleep which some people get up in their rooms after five-o'clock tea, while they are pretending to write their letters, half the witty things that are said at or after dinner would remain unsaid. He had actually slept through the storm, and had only



been awakened by the war of words provoked by the gipsy's appearance.

"That's one for you, Harry," he said; and then addressing the gipsy, he asked, "I have no doubt Sinaminta can tell us all about the oak on the hill."

"Yes, Sinaminta can tell you," said the gipsy; "and it is not long to tell."

"Pray tell us!" was now heard on all sides by a chorus of voices.

"This oak," said Sinaminta, looking up at it almost with affection, "is well known to all the Romany race. Whenever any of us have a camp about here, we come to see it and make offerings to it. You need not laugh, or you may well laugh—offerings are such silly things, like church services and sacraments, when you don't believe in them. But the Romany believe in our offerings, and in the souls of our departed ones, just as all you Christians believe in them. And whenever we know that one of our race has breathed his last by persecution or by law, for to us they often both mean the same thing, that spot becomes holy, and we worship at it with offerings. You Christians do this at Jerusalem and other places; but what you do in churches and temples, the Romany does at woods and wells by the

side of the deep, swift rivers, and under great green oaks, such as this. You call it King Edward's Oak, but it was a great tree long before his time. We call it Deadman's Oak, just as the hill is called Deadman's Hill ; and why we call it so is that one of our chiefs or kings, as you would call him, was taken red-handed, as the saying was, killing King Edward's venison in High Beech Chase, and strung up on the 2nd of June at this very tree. Our stories say that the king, who was a cruel, wicked man, was here himself when the deed was done, and saw our king's death-throes on this very tree on this very day four hundred years ago. I had done my offering round the tree, and was going away across the chase, which we look on just as much our own now as it was four hundred, ay, and a thousand years ago, but the storm drove me back to shelter, and so here I am, to tell you all the story of the tree and of the hill."

"She ought to be caught at once, and have every article of woman's rights given her on the spot," said Edward ; " and she ought to be made a female Professor of History by diploma or by acclamation at the Oxford Commemoration. I think she would puzzle every Don in the University in English History, and I am not sure whether she

would not floor them all in Law and Divinity as well."

Now Lady Sweetapple went up to Sinaminta, and said, "It still rains, Sinaminta, though the storm has passed off. Can you tell fortunes?"

"Yes, I can, and sometimes I can read them by the face without looking at the palm."

"Must I cross it with gold—I mean the palm—if you tell it?"

"Nothing for nothing," said Sinaminta, bitterly; "that's the rule of Romany life, and that's the rule of English life. Your clergymen do not pray or preach for nought; your lawyers do not plead for nought; your judges do not do justice for nought; your very Queen does not reign for nought; why, then, should the poor Romany, who has many secrets to tell, tell your fortunes for nought?"

"But," said Harry, "is a silver fortune better than a golden fortune? That's what I wish to know."

"There are good fortunes and bad fortunes with all the metals," said Sinaminta. "So it must ever be; but for a gay young gentleman, who stands side by side with two such pretty ladies, to talk of a silver fortune, shows, it seems to me, that he has

very little gold in his nature. He shall have a silver fortune if he desires it."

"Upon my word, Harry," said Mr. Beeswing, who had been listening with great delight to Sinaminta's readiness and wit, "you had better give it up, cross Sinaminta's hand at once with gold, or you will get nothing but a brazen fortune out of her."

"When a poor country girl crosses my hand with copper," Sinaminta went on, as though justifying herself, "I give her the best fortune I can, because I know that a penny is all she has to give. Then copper works on my brain as much as gold or precious stones; but when a gentleman or a lady crosses my hand with half-a-crown, I can take no trouble to find out for them secrets for which they are willing to pay such a poor price."

"You think, then," said Lady Sweetapple, almost hissing like Lamia in the poem by Keats, "that every man has his price, and Mr. Fortescue is like all the rest?"

As she said this, she looked at Harry like the wolf in "Red Riding Hood;" but, much to her surprise, Harry neither flinched nor blanched. For all their effect, her words might as well have been uttered to a deaf man.



“What consummate hypocrisy!” was all that Amicia could murmur before the gipsy went on—

“Yes, every man has his price, and every woman, too; young men and husbands, maidens and wives and widows—they have all their price, as well as the Romany. When they’re low, they put it low; and when they’re high, they put it high. That’s all the difference.”

“And what do you think is this gentleman’s price, Sinaminta?” said Lady Sweetapple, pushing Harry Fortescue forward.

“How can I tell till I see his hand?” said the gipsy. “Let him cross my palm with gold and put out his hand like a man, and I will tell you his fortune and his price.”

“Yes, Mr. Fortescue,” said Florry, “do have your fortune told, it will be so nice.”

“Nicer for you than for me,” said Harry. “But here goes, if it will give you any pleasure.”

And with these words he put his hand into his waistcoat-pocket and brought out a sovereign, which he tossed to the gipsy, who let it drop and never stooped to take it up.

“There is the gold,” said Harry, “and here is my hand.”

“Yes,” said the gipsy with a sneer; “there is

your gold, and there let it lie where it fell. Pride, they say, goes before a fall. If you wish Sinaminta to tell your fortune, you must not throw your gold to her as though she were a dog, but cross her palm with it properly, like a gentleman, and then she may tell your fortune."

"Well," said Harry, "anything for a quiet life," as he picked up the sovereign and crossed the olive palm of the gipsy with it, leaving the coin in it after the operation was over. "And now here is my hand. Tell me quick what you see in it."

The gipsy looked at his palm, and then said—

"There are two trying for you, and I see a third in the background."

"Just as I thought," said Lady Sweetapple to herself. "Two of us here, and Edith Price in the background, away in Lupus Street."

"Just like you gipsies," said Harry. "Because there are two young ladies close by, you say there are two trying for me, which is all a story; and then, to fill up your fortune-telling, you bring in the third in the background. We all know what these two young ladies are like, so don't waste words on them. Tell us something about the third in the background. Is she dark or fair?"

"Dark," said the gipsy, "very dark; and she is

dressed in black, and she is expecting a letter from you. It will make her very happy when she gets it."

"Can you tell us her name—this dark lady's name?" asked Amicia eagerly.

"I don't think I can," said Sinaminta, "but you may be sure she has her price, like all the rest of you."

"Has her price?" cried Harry, as if waking up out of a dream; "how very strange!" and then he drew away his hand, saying, "This is past a joke. I won't hear anything more about the dark lady in the background."

"Just like young men," said the gipsy; "always in the present, as you yourself said. When the two here are absent, the third will be present, and then you will think of her. I hope she may get her letter, poor thing!"

"I won't hear any more of your lies," said Harry; "tell the fortune of some one else. Here, Edward, why don't you have your fortune told? I have made sport enough for the rest of you."

"Oh," said Lady Sweetapple, "I assure you, Mr. Fortescue, I have heard quite enough."

"And I," said Edward, "am so sure that all Sinaminta's tales are true, that I am afraid to hold out my hand."

"Colonel Barker!" shouted out Harry, "come and have your fortune told. You'll be just as wet here under the shade as you are out there. Come and have your fortune told."

"A man who has made his fortune, like that old gentleman, has no need to have it told," said Sinaminta. "It only does good to the young, who have the world before them."

"Why does it do them any good?" asked Florry.

"Because, though no one can avoid his fate, it sometimes makes it easier to bear if one knows what it is to be beforehand."

"That's not what Mr. Rubrick says," said Florry. "He says it is a blessing not to know our destiny before it happens."

"Very likely," said Sinaminta. "That's the parson who gave one of our people a month for stealing a faggot, though, bless your pretty face, one faggot is as much like another faggot as one egg is like another egg; and yet Mr. Rubrick swore to his faggot. The parsons, miss, like to keep fate—your fate and my fate—in their own hands. They say they know all about it, and where we shall go to if we do or do not as they bid us; but though they are so wise they do not even know their own faggots, and though they are so certain of what the end of this life's journey will



be, they can never say what is to happen to us in the meanwhile. I care nothing for the end of life; but between birth and death there is much to tell, as to husbands and wives, weal and woe, riches and poverty, and yet no parson on earth can tell us aught about it."

By this time Mrs. Marjoram had come up, attracted by the gipsy's declamation. She had heard her last denunciation of parsons' ignorance, and cut in with—

"That, my good young woman, is because such knowledge has been denied us, for the wisest reasons, by an all-merciful Providence. It would be very bad for us to know beforehand all that was to befall us. It would make us discontented, and cause us to repine against the decrees of the Creator."

"That's twice to-day that I have been called good," said Sinaminta mockingly. "If I am called good a third time I shall never need to have my fortune told; for what says our proverb?—'Three times good, lucky for life.' But I do not agree with you when you say it is bad to know what is to befall us. There's many a wife who, if she had to choose her husband over again, would never choose the husband she has, and many a husband who would sooner have married any other woman than the wife

he has. Discontented and repining ! Why, half the discontent and sorrow in life comes of men and women taking steps in the dark which they can't retrace ; and of all dark steps the darkest is marriage, as you have made it by your laws."

" That's a facer for you," thought Mr. Beeswing ; " really Sinaminta sees her way in the dark as clearly as most people."

But Mrs. Marjoram still persisted. She was a glutton, as they say in the " ring," and wanted more punishing.

" Your principles are very bad."

" I have no principles," said Sinaminta ; " I leave those to my betters ; but I have feelings, and what I say is, that I have seen more feeling in my own people, in tents and waggons on windy commons and bleak hill-sides, than I ever saw in houses and towns ; ay, or in churches, where we hear so much principle and see so little practice. But the storm is over, and you are all afraid to hear your fortunes told by the poor gipsy. As it is, you have only heard one not a quarter told. I must be away with my babe to our tents. Good evening." And with these words she strode off across the heath and fern.



CHAPTER XXII.

THE DRIVE HOME.

WHEN the gipsy was gone, the storm was over, and the party preferred to go home.

Horses and carriages were summoned, and they all returned in the same way in which they came, except that Mr. Beeswing exchanged his seat in the break for Kitty's back, while Mr. Marjoram was driven home in peace. He had at last found something which tormented him more than Mrs. Marjoram, and for once he seemed quite happy in sitting next that lady, and beholding the gambols of Kitty with Mr. Beeswing on her back. But the younger son of the house of Port was a most excellent horseman; and if Mr. Marjoram had a bad time of it going to the oak with Kitty, Kitty had as bad a one in returning to High Beech with Mr. Beeswing.

Lady Carlton had not paid much attention to the gipsy; her thoughts having been chiefly taken up

by the storm and with Count Pantouffles' efforts at conversation.

“What did you find to say to the gipsy woman, Lady Sweetapple?” said Lady Carlton. “She seemed to talk a great deal.”

“She was a very strange woman indeed,” said Lady Sweetapple, “and I should like to see more of her. She is the only gipsy who ever impressed me at all with her pretended powers. We should have got more out of her if Mr. Fortescue had not been so impatient. That put her out, and the end was that she left his fortune not half told.”

“Do you believe in gipsies, Count Pantouffles?” said Lady Carlton.

“Not I. I do not believe in such nonsense,” said Count Pantouffles. “I am above all silly superstitions, I hope.”

After this decided opinion, the conversation in the pony-carriage flagged and died out. Lady Carlton thought of her dinner-party, and hoped she should get home in time to dress. Count Pantouffles looked serene, and said nothing. And as for Lady Sweetapple, she threw herself back in her seat and wondered what the truth could be about that Edith Price, and how Sinaminta could have hit the right nail on the head so cleverly in

bringing in the dark young lady in the background while she was telling Harry Fortescue's fortune.

In the break the party were much more lively. Harry and Edward, and Florry and Alice, were very happy; and Mr. Marjoram, for the reason given, was comparatively happy. Besides this, they were all dry. Colonel Barker and his wife were the only wet ones; and all the gallant colonel had gained by asserting his theory of thunder and lightning was, that he and his wife were drenched to the skin.

“Well, colonel,” said Harry, “how do you feel?”

“Pretty well,” growled the colonel. “If it were not for Mrs. Barker, I shouldn't care one bit about the ducking; but if I were wet a thousand times, I should never be so mad as to think of standing under a tree in a storm like that.”

“It's a pity,” said Edward, “you were not there to hear what the gipsy said of that. It would put you rather out of conceit with your theory.”

“What did she say?” asked Colonel Barker.

“I hope you won't mind it,” said Edward, “but she said that none but a fool would go from under the shelter of a tree when there was thunder and rain together. She gave a reason for it which you may as well hear.”

“I am quite ready to hear it, though she did call me a fool,” said the colonel.

“Well,” said Edward, “she said that in all the records of her race, she had never heard of any one being struck by lightning in rain, for it was well known that the rain drew the power out of the lightning, and rendered it harmless.”

“No!” said Mrs. Barker, “did she say that? And to think, Jerry, that I should have spoiled my black silk all for nothing.”

“My dear,” said Colonel Barker, “if one is to take as gospel every idle word that gipsy women say, we should have a bad time of it. You had better trust to me, and get wet with me, than rely on gipsy traditions.”

“So I do, Colonel Barker; so I do. I would rather believe you than a whole camp full of gipsies.”

“Very good,” said Colonel Barker, “very good. And now let us say no more about it. I only hope, dear, you will not take cold. As for the dress, it is not worth thinking of.”

“But, Edward,” said Harry, “when did the gipsy woman tell you all that about the lightning and the rain? I thought you and Miss Alice had not spoken a word to her till long after I had found her out.”

“Come, come!” said Edward, “that will never

do. The fact was, that you were so busy with Miss Carlton and Lady Sweetapple, that you paid no attention to what I was about. Then it was that Sinaminta told me all about the rain and the lightning. Was it not, Miss Alice Carlton?"

"Yes, it was just as you say, Mr. Vernon," said Alice, who was just then in such a mood that if Edward Vernon had said that he and she had just jumped out of the crater of Vesuvius, she would have backed his words in every particular. But the real truth was, that this was all an idle invention of Edward's to tease Colonel Barker, because he was an old fogey, with his old-fashioned notions about thunder and lightning.

When they reached the Hall, they found that Sir Thomas had long since returned, and been rather in a way about them. At first, when he found they had gone to the oak, he wanted to ride out and meet them; for, not to mention his visitors, Sir Thomas Carlton dearly loved his wife and daughters. But when he got to the stables and ordered his groom to saddle Kitty, it was only to hear that Mr. Marjoram was on Kitty; and when he ordered the brown hack, to be told that the "brown hack" was in physic. In fact, it was another case of husbands' proposing and wives' disposing; and so he had to choose be-

tween staying at home and walking off to meet them in the rain. Like many men before him, Sir Thomas Carlton came to a compromise. He did walk out, and he did not get wet; for he walked in the open corridor between the drawing-rooms and the terrace in front of High Beech, and so, though he got most of the air, he had none of the wet, though he was in a fine way till they all came back.

As he walked up and down the terrace he said out loud, “To think of putting Marjoram on Kitty, the most ‘gamesome ’oss,’ as my groom says, in all the country round. I trust that neither of two things will happen—first, that she will not throw poor Marjoram off and break his legs, and secondly, that Marjoram will not throw poor Kitty down and break her knees. He is a good fellow, and she is a most excellent mare.”

“I am so glad to see you all safe and sound,” were the words of Sir Thomas as he handed Lady Sweetapple and Lady Carlton out of the pony-carriage, and saw the break close up behind and Kitty cantering along with Mr. Beeswing in the distance; “and not wet too!—how did you manage that?”

“By taking Mr. Fortescue’s advice and staying under the tree,” said Lady Sweetapple. “If we had followed Colonel Barker, who led Mrs. Barker

away into what he called the open, we should have been wet to the skin, and spoilt all our things."

With these words, Lady Sweetapple ran up-stairs to dress, for which, in her opinion, there was barely time; but still, as she scaled the slippery staircase she muttered, "Every man has his price, and so has Harry Fortescue his Edith Price—the gipsy's dark lady in the background."

END OF VOL. I.









